# Marigold beds and villa horses

Low-density housing in Norway

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***Summary:***
A number of rural municipalities in Norway suffer from population decline. In an effort to attract new residents, local authorities would like to offer large, attractive and secluded building sites. Moreover, such developments are occurring at the same time as Norway is attempting to reformulate its agricultural policy. The new multifunctional agriculture policy ('Landbruk pluss') denotes the Norwegian Government's new thinking. It seeks to promote new business, jobs and attractive housing schemes – in addition to reducing regulatory complexity. However, local councils may potentially run into problems putting this new policy into practice because the low -density housing model that they espouse in many ways contradicts traditional planning policy, which has tended to favour high-density housing. Does this mean that low-density housing could become a 'planning problem'? This is the question discussed in this article. The article also focuses on the question of population change in Norway over the last decade: What kind of population distribution pattern can we detect – and thus, can a new housing policy have any influence on the population distribution pattern?

***Keywords:***
Low-density housing, planning, multifunctional agriculture, rural communities, population trends

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## 1. Introduction

In population terms, Iveland is a relatively small Norwegian municipality. It does however have lots of available land for housing development, while also being within commuting distance to Norway's fifth largest city, Kristiansand, on the south coast. In an attempt to encourage more people to settle in Iveland the local council is marketing the municipality as a place where 'people can build new homes on idyllic and – if desired – large building lots'. We can see from the municipality's own web pages (at www.iveland.kommune.no) that:

> 'There are small sites with their own private shorelines, ideal for a family home, others are medium sized, and more suitable for multi-family / multi-generation homes; the biggest sites are almost the size of a small farm, with all the possibilities that offers for inspiration and activity.'

The land released for housing, according to the details provided on the web, gives potential buyers an opportunity to define how remote – or close – they want to be from their neighbours. The sites permit owners to customise their own residential style. They give people an opportunity to experience the good life, a life in harmony with nature, in peace and tranquillity, somewhere to relax from the hectic demands of everyday life. The authorities highlight how each site has space for a vegetable plot, a marigold bed and an orchard, while some are even big enough to grow hay for villa horses and rabbits.

*Photo: Tingtjønn, a small lake (in winter) near land released for very low density housing in Iveland (source: www.Iveland.kommune.no)*

There are several attractive aspects to these new sites, which are ready for building. In relation to urban prices, they are very affordable. The size of the largest sites far exceeds what one could hope to find in urban areas. The largest site currently for sale in Iveland is almost 5 acres – 19,206 sq.m. – and costs 304,000 Norwegian kroner (about € 38,500). In addition to the site itself, the price includes survey charges and water and sewage

connection charges. The sites lie in an area of pristine nature – and only, as the notice on the web page puts it, a stone's throw from 'vibrant and pulsating' urban centres.

Iveland is not unique in a Norwegian context. Several Norwegian rural councils are trying eagerly to meet residents' housing preferences. If a buyer wants a large and secluded site, these councils are ready to do what they can to make sure he or she gets it. But it is in planning for the development of these sites that councils could potentially run into problems. Low density housing in many respects flies in the face of the planning policy generally endorsed by the central planning authorities, with its focus on densification. Does this mean that low-density housing could then become a planning problem? In the next part of this article we will discuss the Norwegian land planning system, looking in particular at the challenges it is currently facing in rural areas. The planning system is part of the institutional system of government and, as such, obviously important in the design of Norwegian policies.

At the same time, both Norway and the rest of Europe are undergoing important structural changes, changes that are not necessarily amenable to government regulation. In part three of this article we will then look at some of the main demographic trends in Norway over the last decade. To conclude, in part four we will round up the main points and draw some tentative conclusions.

## 2. A planning problem?

From the vantage point of the central authorities, local councils' planning policies may seem slightly anarchic: planning permission is given for whatever the planning application happens to ask for. An incrementalist approach like this runs contrary to the philosophy espoused by the national planning authorities, which says that land development must be undertaken in an orderly, planned fashion (Næss 2000:4-5, Stortingsmelding nr 29, 1996-97).

Low-density housing is thus liable to be seen in Norway as a 'planning problem', increasing the likelihood of disputes arising between landowners, local councils and other authorities. Moreover, this is happening at the same time as Norway is reformulating its agricultural policy. The new multi-functional agriculture policy ('*Landbruk Plus' or Farming Plus*) denotes the Norwegian Government's new thinking in this area (St.prp. nr 1, 2004-05). It seeks to promote new businesses, jobs and attractive housing schemes, in addition to reducing regulatory complexity, or cutting 'red tape'. It also seeks to devolve powers to the local authorities. Some interpret this as an assault on the established planning philosophy. In terms of their specific interactions then, agricultural and planning policy are becoming increasingly inconsistent. This has caused local councils with space to spare and few developmental pressures to become more vocal in respect of their criticism of the planning system. As such, there is now growing local impatience and a groundswell of opinion in favour of a more flexible, less complicated approach to land use planning.

The current Planning and Building Act came into force in 1985, and is applicable across Norway. The Act serves numerous purposes, and, as a reflection of the changing nature of society, 'has always changed or been affected by change', as a committee drafting amendments to the Act put it (NOU 2001:7, p. 40). The Act as it currently stands descends from the 1965 Building Act, the first attempt in Norway to enact a building law

that applied to the whole country. Up to that point, the Urban Planning Act of 1924 only required urban authorities to plan land use in detail.

The sharp rise in building activity after 1945 necessitated a revision of the law. In the view of the government at the time, it was essential to bring building activity in rural Norway under statutory control by means of up-to-date legislation. From 1965, all Norwegian local councils were obliged to draft so-called general plans, as set out in the provisions of the new act. Such plans were supposed to cover the entire territory within a municipality's borders, not simply land turned over for development. This represented a significant enlargement in the scope and coverage of planning regulations and planning ambitions. Quasi-urban areas historically account for less than 1 per cent of Norway's total land mass: because of the 1965-law, all of a sudden 100 per cent would have to come under planning scrutiny (Skjeggedal 2000:122). Post-1945 developments made these amendments necessary, at least in the view of the government.

It soon became apparent however that local councils were not going to start planning just because the government told them to do so. Even a decade after the implementation of the new national Building Act only a small percentage of local councils were actually making statuary plans meeting with general government criteria (Arge et al. 1976:29). Moreover, the municipalities that were following government instructions were in the main the most populous ones in the core areas of the country.

As early as the 1970s, a revision of the Building Act was therefore put in motion, though a new act did not emerge until 1985. In connection with the drafting of this new law – which is still on the books today – a new planning concept was launched – the 'LNF area'. LNF is an acronym for '*Landbruks,- natur- og friluftsområde*"; 'Agricultural, Natural and Recreational Area'. The 1985 Planning and Building Act thus provides for building and construction in these LNF designated areas as much as it does for building in general. However, farming and forestry work, such as planting, felling, laying forest tracks, etc., come under special laws. Between the Building Act regime on the one hand, and sectoral interests on the other, these LNF areas have been a never-ending source of decision-making conflict (Skjeggedal 2000:123).

The Planning and Building Act leaves local authorities to decide upon the size and siting of low-density housing developments in the LNF areas. This is a sensible approach, according to Skjeggedal, in places where there is not much building going on. As a rule, however, the supply of buildable sites will exceed demand in the LNF areas. The situation is, in other words, the reverse of that facing urban planners. The problem here is to divert demand towards specific sites. In rural areas, people in the home building market necessarily have a much wider assortment of sites from which to pick and choose.

From a *planning perspective*, however, 'picking and choosing' can cause problems. A land use planner wants to see roads, pavements, cycle paths, sewage, water and other infrastructure as part of a planning package. A comprehensive Norwegian study of smaller urban centres as such recommended precisely this, namely, a policy of densification. According to Næss (1992:19), by increasing and encouraging densification on brown field land, and utilising each site effeciently, the natural environment gains would be appreciable. Moreover, they would be particularly impressive if future development and planning managed to combine short transport distances, minimal land use, better public transport and congestion-reducing measures.

It is nevertheless an open question as to whether holistic planning approaches such as this are practical in the rural areas of Norway. While the layout of the built environment may seem rather 'anarchic' from a classical planning point of view, it does not necessarily look that way to the individual home-builder. Clearly then a different interpretation of what is 'sensible' exists in the countryside. Low-density developments may be based on careful considerations: for many, a *particular* site may be the answer to their dreams (cf. Skjeggedal 2000:122).

## 3. Population distribution patterns in Norway

In European terms Norway, is a sparsely populated nation: about 4.5 million people have roughly 300,000 sq.km. to divide among themselves – which works out at about 15 people per square kilometre. In comparison, there are 124 people per square kilometre in France, and 465 in Holland (cf. Statistics Norway: Statistical yearbook 2003).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Norway – like most other European countries – stopped being a nation principally of farmers, and became an increasingly urbanised society, with most people living in the cities. As we speak, more than two-thirds of the population is concentrated in a tiny proportion of the country's total area. The *person per square kilometre* rate is 150 in these areas. Less than a tenth of the population resides in places with no more than five people per square kilometre. As such then, most Norwegians now live in urban regions. Demographic trends over the past few decades do *not* suggest an imminent change in this pattern. On the contrary. In the 1980s, according to Foss and Selstad (1997:24), the wave of centralisation grew dramatically, with urban regions accounting for almost the entirety of growth in jobs, 80 per cent of which were created in the largest cities, that is to say, four out of five new jobs were created in the large urban regions. In a parallel development, jobs in rural areas declined sharply.

Now although job figures grew most in urbanised parts, one might have expected residential patterns to remain more or less the same: at least some people may have wanted to live rurally, despite working in towns and cities. But Foss and Selstad found no evidence of this. What they did discover was a clear correlation between job creation and population growth. Nor did they find evidence of a 'love of home' replacing 'love of work', i.e., a form of post-materialist orientation towards more leisure time and more rural patterns of residence (ibid: 25).

Regional trends after the 1980s confirm this centralising pattern (Selstad 1997:78–79). Moreover, as businesses become more internationally orientated and the nation-state continues to fray, peripheral rural areas are not likely to see renewal and revitalisation. Instead, emerging towns are becoming the centrepoint of regional growth. This is not to say that *nobody* will ever settle in these rural areas again, but it does suggest that the demand for housing in these parts of the country will continue to be relatively small for the foreseeable future.

Later studies confirm that a process of centralisation is still ongoing in Norway (Sørlie 2005).

*Table 1: Population trends 1995-2005. By region. Based on Sørlie (2005). Figures in thousands*

| | **1995** | **2005** | **Absolute difference 1995–2005** | **Percentage difference 1995-2005** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| City regions | 2,278 | 2,512 | + 234 | + 10,3 % |
| Urban regions | 1,103 | 1,154 | + 51 | + 4,7 % |
| Quasi-urban regions | 323 | 323 | + 0 | + 0.1 % |
| Rural regions | 645 | 617 | - 28 | - 4.4 % |
| **Norway overall** | **4,348** | **4,606** | **+ 258** | **+ 5,9 %** |

As we see from Table 1, Norway's population grew by 258,000 over the last ten years, with the city regions increase being even stronger than in the 1980s (10.3 per cent compared to 6.9 per cent in the 1980s). Despite a national rise of nearly 6 per cent in the last ten years, the rural regions faced a declining population, losing some 28,000 inhabitants in absolute terms, or a percentage drop of 4.4.

This migration to urban areas coupled with the stagnation, or even decline, in the rural population is one of the most important developments in recent Norwegian history. Moreover, it is taking place simultaneously with far-reaching structural changes in the agricultural sector. We see, of course, similar agricultural reforms in other parts of Europe as well, not least as a result of EU agricultural policy (Murdoch et al. 2003; Kristensen 2004). In Norway, the number of farms has fallen rapidly: in 25 years, half of the jobs have disappeared (www.ssb.no/jordbruk). Indeed, every new year sees the closure of many more farms.

Notwithstanding these fundamental structural changes, institutional changes in the farming sector are also impacting on the current situation. The abovementioned multifunctional agriculture programme (*Farming Plus*) intends to cut red tape and to make it easier for people to establish businesses in rural areas. This is fundamentally in response to the stagnation of the rural population. While low-density housing schemes are probably not enough to reverse the trend nationally, they may make a difference in some municipalities, where distances to the nearest town are manageable and the sites are attractive. In the towns and cities where there is high demand for building sites, and people accept living in close proximity to one another, low density housing will be too expensive for ordinary people. In the extreme periphery, on the other hand, there is virtually no housing demand to speak of. It is in the municipalities in between however, the urban belts encircling the larger urban centres, where low-density housing *could* have an effect. These municipalities lie beyond the traditional suburbs, but nevertheless within commuting distance of urban centres.

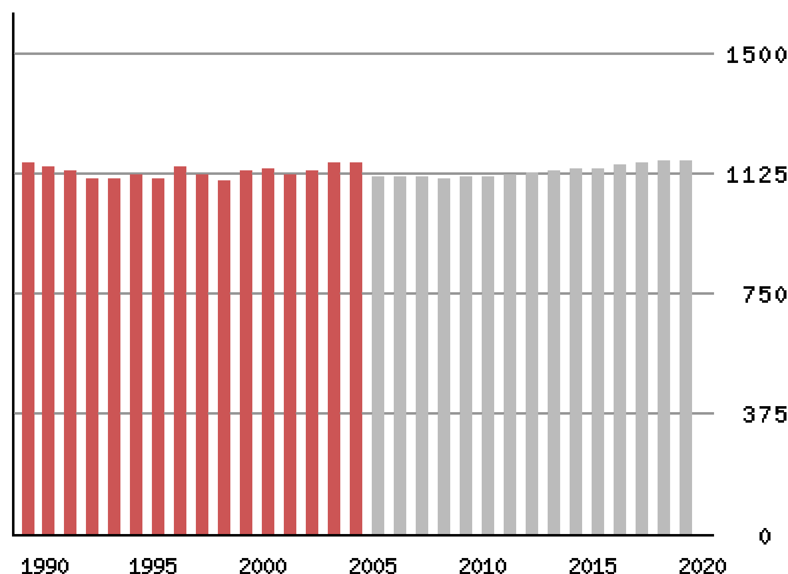
## 4. Conclusions

In a sense, we now see two mutually incompatible conceptions of land use and land management developing, the one rural or peripheral, the other urban or central. 'Good' planning in central terms means filing land use plans in official documents, and concentrating homes in relatively small areas. In peripheral terms, to put it rather bluntly, the opposite is true. Official documents setting out inflexible parameters thus have no real value. First, because a planned development may never happen. Second, because people who are actually in the market for new homes may have particular desires or needs it is impossible to foresee in advance. In any case, densification seems pointless to people in the countryside, where land is the one thing that there is enough of.

Forty years after its inception, national Norwegian planning legislation, which nominally applies to *every inch* of land in *every* Norwegian municipality, has seen several important amendments. Although planning law is, perhaps understandably, not warmly appreciated by all rural councils the national planning regime nevertheless has a significant bearing on land planning policies in rural Norway. During those same forty years, far-reaching structural changes have however taken place, not least in terms of population distribution.

Iveland is clearly marketing low-density housing to entice more people to settle in the municipality. It is difficult however to predict how successful they will be. It is now some time since Iveland council has adopted this policy. Indeed, in connection with the end of the old millennium, for instance, they advertised – 'millennium plots for sale'. As the figure below shows, Iveland's population has neither significantly grown nor shrunk, though there was a small rise recently, from about 1,125 to 1,154, as of January 1, 2005. The population prognosis for Iveland, worked out by Statistics Norway, does not however suggest continued growth. Nor, on the other hand, do they expect it to decline.

*Figure 1: Iveland's population 1990–2005, with prognosis 2006-20. Prognosis based on alternative average growth.*[1]




[1] *Source: Statistics Norway.*

Commuting figures for Iveland are interesting in this context. In 1990, 55 per cent of the working population had jobs in other municipalities. By 2000, that figure had risen to a startling 66.5 per cent (Juvkam 2002:103-104). In 2000 then, only one third of the municipality's working population actually worked and resided in the same municipality. Commuting figures for Iveland were among the highest in the country according to data for the year 2000. The council's low -density housing scheme *may* have been a factor in stabilising the population – in which case, offering properties large enough for 'villa horses and marigold beds' may have an influence on population trends in rural Norway in the years to come.

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