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Land-Use Conflicts and Economic Growth in Baldwin Co., AL: A Zero-Sum Game?

Kayleigh James (BA SOCY) and Robert McAlister (BA SOCY)

Introduction

Baldwin County has experienced the second highest rate of population growth since the year 2000.[1] This case-study looks at land usage in Baldwin County to see if this has led to increased competition and/or conflict between the three main sectors of the economy vying for this fixed and finite resource.

Introduction cont.

We attempt to answer the following researchable questions: Has Baldwin County experienced population growth in recent years, and if so; are there land-use conflicts between the agricultural, commercial, and residential sectors? What are the bio-physical and socio-economic effects of these land-use conflicts?

Methods

A mass-media content analysis and literature review were conducted on an individual basis. The mass-media content analysis surveyed opinion-leading newspapers for articles pertaining to land-use conflict in locales similar to those found in Baldwin County and along the gulf coast. A literature review was conducted to find peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles related to land-use conflicts.

Methods cont.

Class discussions of theoretical concepts are paired with our findings to provide possible explanations of why land-use conflicts have emerged and continue within Baldwin County and surrounding areas. We have used two theoretical concepts to explore these issues: the “treadmill of production” and “growth machine.” Based on our research, we have six findings.

Spanish Fort 1974 – U.S. Geological Survey

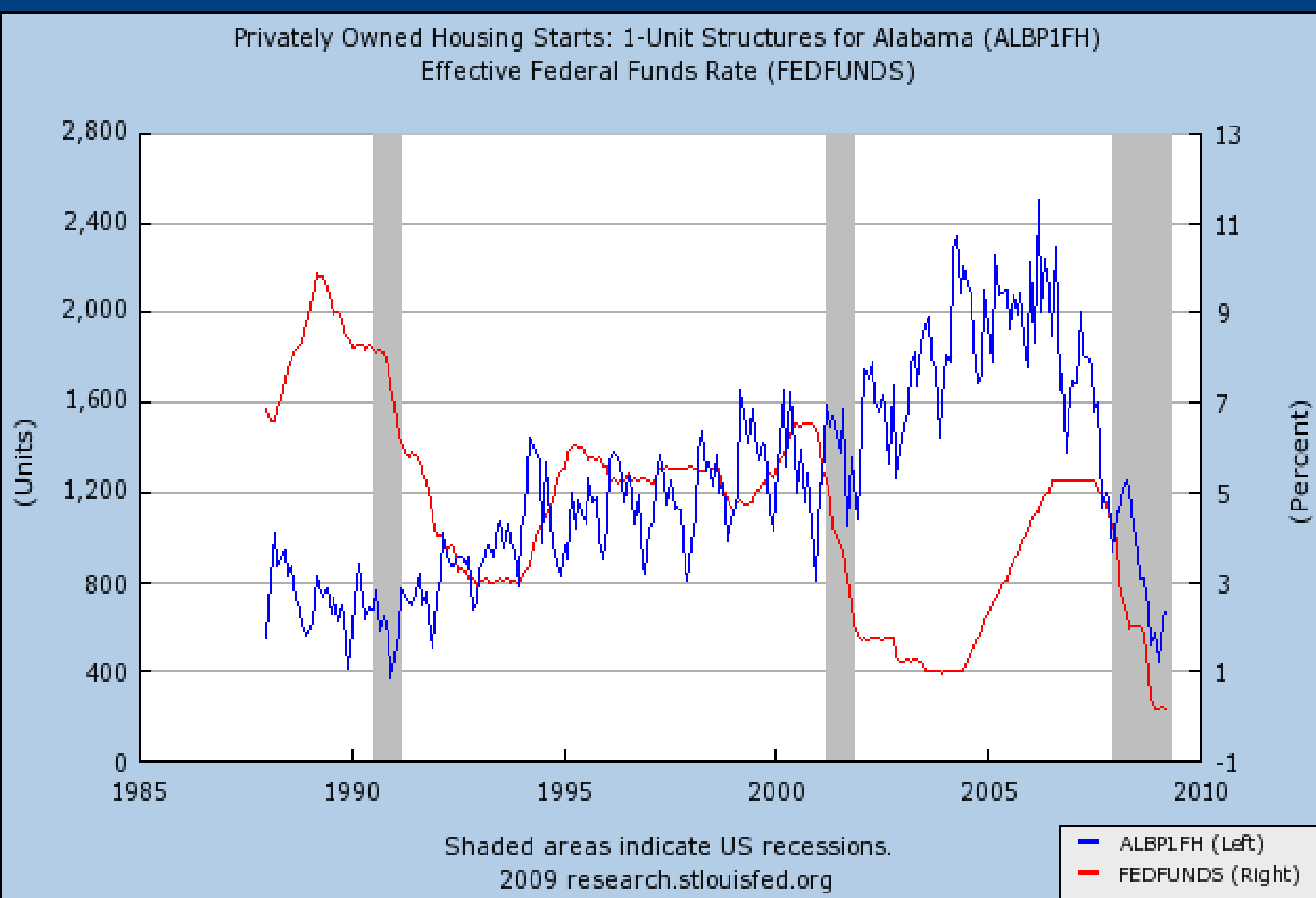


Spanish Fort 2008 – Google Earth



Findings 1: Evidence of the Treadmill of Production

The “treadmill of production” theory suggests that “the state, along with private capital, work together to make low interest loans available to consumers for the purchase of homes and other items.”[2] This is done to “ensure a continued cycle of production and consumption.”[3] Findings of both the content analysis and the literature review provide evidence which support this aspect of the treadmill of production theory. Artificially low interest rates were a leading cause of the housing boom experienced in the Mobile Bay watershed. These low interest rates have simultaneously produced over-consumption and mal-investment.



Findings 2: Land-Use Conflicts

When government officials, whether local or national, promote economic growth with little regard to possible harmful environmental impacts, the “treadmill of production” is readily observable in practice.[4] City officials of Baldwin County have passed pro-growth policies which have impacted the agricultural sector within Baldwin County, Alabama. These policies have increased the land-use conflicts between the residential, agricultural, and commercial sectors. The growth in both the residential and commercial sectors has encouraged new residents to move into rural farming communities of Baldwin County.

Findings 5: Manufactured Lifestyles

Media content analysis revealed a Spanish Fort development in the planning stages that will include twenty-six neighborhoods and shopping opportunities within a half mile of each residence (e.g. Rave Motion Picture Cinema). The project, which is estimated to take decades for completion, is an example of the type of construction that is occurring all over Baldwin County. There is an increasing prevalence of “lifestyle as a project” in this area, in which convenience, luxury and social status are given high regard.[7]

Findings 3: Plans for Continued Growth

There is evidence to suggest that officials of Baldwin County encourage economic development and population growth because of the boost this development gives to the economy. This development, however, leaves the agricultural sector with a smaller proportion of the land. High land values create an opportunity for aging farmers to sell their land to developers for retirement purposes. Analysis of various zoning documents for upcoming years show no indication of this rapid growth slowing down. New college opportunities and new tourist markets are two goals of the Baldwin County Comprehensive Plan for 2008-2025.[5]

Findings 6: Environmental Impacts

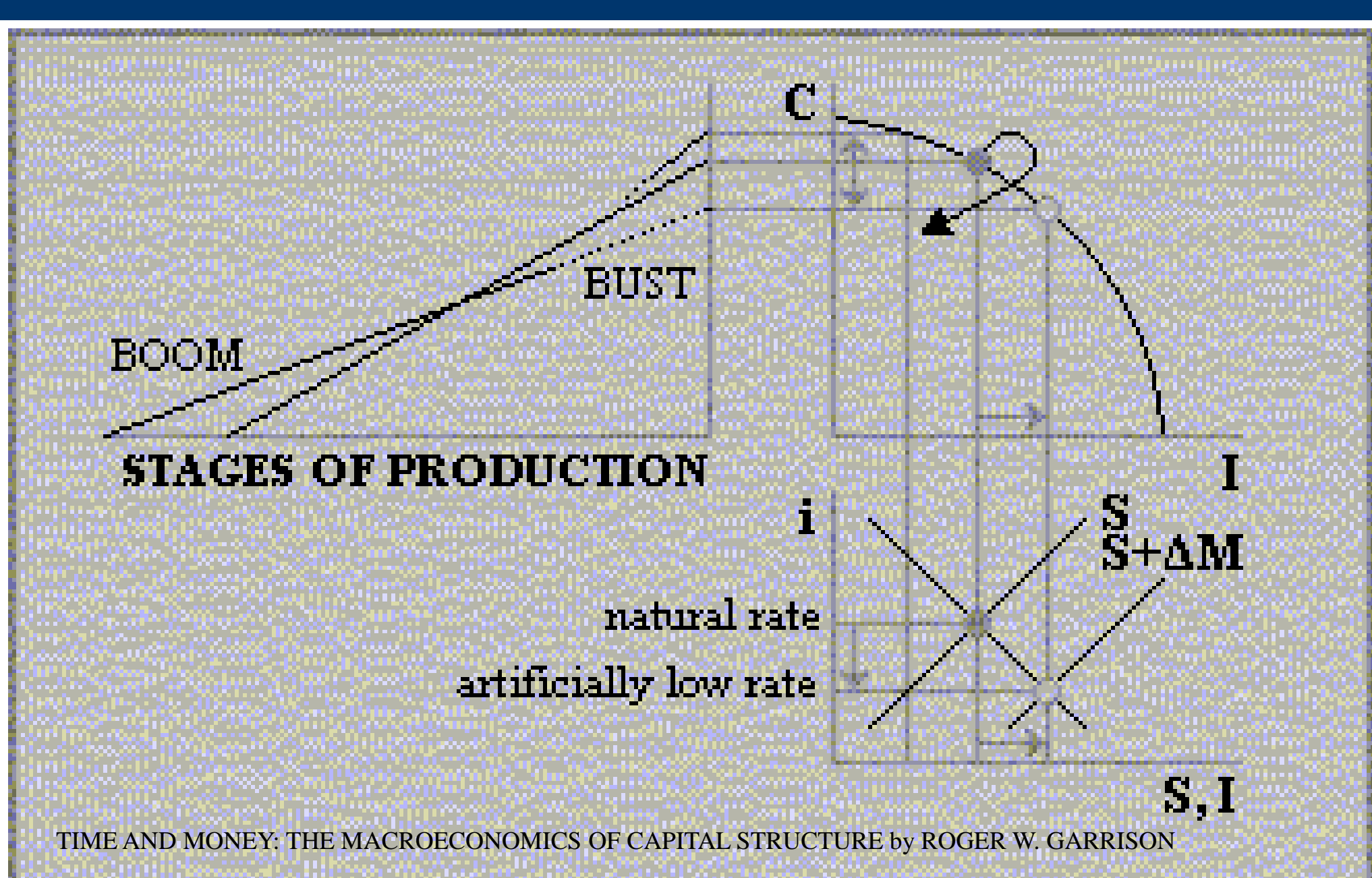
The ongoing residential and/or commercial construction creates continual water polluting run-off from construction sites. Agricultural practices also create water polluting run-off but the shift from agriculture to residential changes the exact nature of the water pollution. Two other major impacts of development are erosion and deforestation. Population growth as a result of these newly constructed neighborhoods and an influx of tourists into these new tourism hubs requires new infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and sewer systems; this in turn exacerbates the problems of both erosion and deforestation.

Findings 4: Evidence of a “Growth Machine”

The theory of the “growth machine” suggests that a government and corporate alliance acts to promote economic growth for their mutual benefit.[6] The interplay between these two is a factor which determines the nature and rate of economic growth. There is evidence that the growth machine may be the entity that is driving most of Baldwin County’s natural resource issues. City and county officials advocate for residential and commercial development and as a result the agricultural sector becomes less influential within the local economy. Agricultural land becomes a less abundant resource. Since land is a major commodity, landowners are given the opportunity to increase their wealth.

Conclusion

Policies which are intended to promote economic growth (à la the “treadmill of production”) have ramifications for both the environment as well as for society as a whole. A policy of low interest rates has been a major contributing factor to the rapid rise in population that Baldwin County has experienced over the course of the past decade. The large influx of new residents into Baldwin County has displaced much of the traditional culture of the county and placed additional burdens upon the environment. The composition of land-use in Baldwin County has also undergone a transition. Baldwin County land usage has historically been primarily agricultural but in recent years there has been a shift out of agriculture and into both residential and commercial land use.



References

[1] US Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights (for Gulf Shores, AL), US Census Bureau, 2007, webpage: US-Census-GulfShoresAL. [2] Schnalberg, Allan, David N. Pellow, and Adam Weinberg, 2002. The Treadmill of Production and the Environmental State. In *The Environmental State Under Pressure*, edited by A. P. J. Mol and F. H. Buitel. Amsterdam: JAI. [3] *Ibid*. [4] Hannigan, John A. 2006. “Contemporary theoretical approaches to environmental sociology.” Pp. 16-35 in *Environmental Sociology*. London UK: Routledge. [5] Genesis Group, 2008. The Baldwin County Comprehensive Plan 2008-2025. 2.1-2.18 [6] Carter-North, Patrick, 2005. “Growth machine meets conservation: A stakeholder analysis of the Black Warrior and Cahaba river watersheds.” Paper presented during the Annual meetings of the Rural Sociological Society, Tampa, FL, August 8-13 [7] Shove, Elizabeth and Warde, Alan. 2002. “Inconscious Consumption: The Sociology of consumption, lifestyles, and the environment.” *Sociological Theory and the Environment: Classical Foundations, Contemporary Insights*.