

# Research Summary of “Motivations for Family Forestland Parcelization in the Catskill/Delaware Watersheds of New York”

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Why do landowners subdivide? What causes a family who has held onto their property for decades or even generations to abandon that legacy to development? And what, if anything, can we do to help them keep their land intact and their forest as forest?

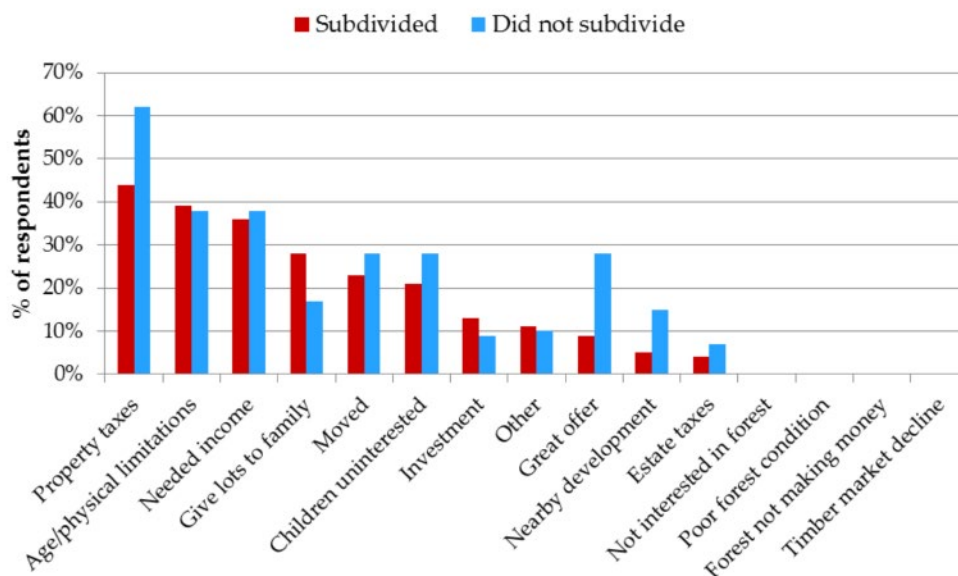
Two Yale University researchers wanted to answer these questions. To do that, Rebecca Sanborn Stone and Mary Tyrrell surveyed landowners in the New York City Watershed region of upstate New York. They contacted both landowners who had subdivided and sold land as well as those who had kept their land intact. From the more than 320 responses, they gained surprising insight into what makes private woodland owners give up on landownership.

In many ways the two landowner groups were similar. Both owned land for the beauty, privacy, and recreation it provided. Both had the same top two concerns: property taxes and keeping their land intact for their heirs.

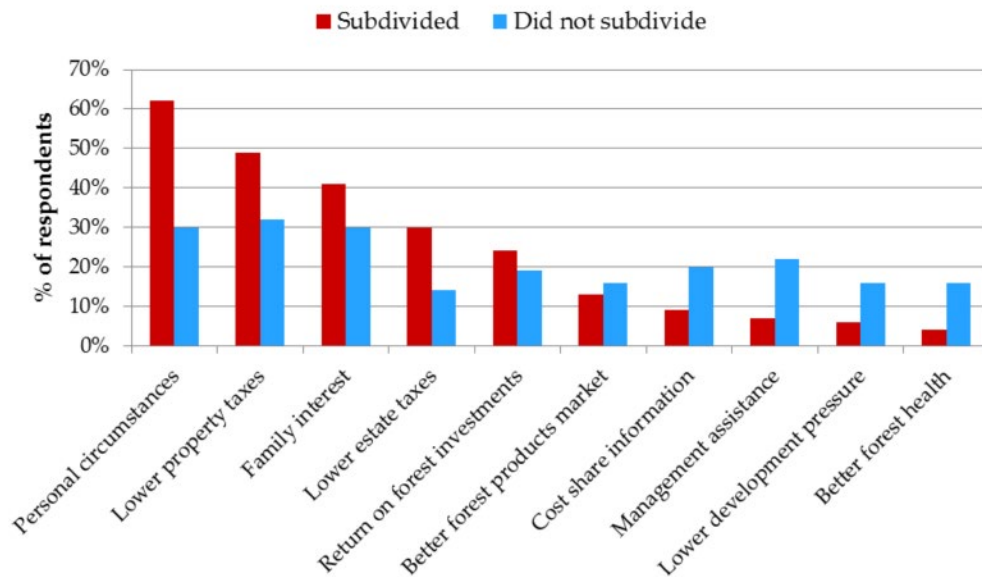
But there were differences too. Landowners who subdivided had lower incomes, less formal education, and were more likely to be retired. Nearly half of subdividing owners had annual household incomes below \$50,000 per year, compared with 20% for landowners who hadn't subdivided. Those who worked in “blue collar” jobs with traditionally lower incomes, like farming and construction, were more likely to subdivide than those who had “white collar” careers like finance.

These financial issues came up again when Stone and Tyrrell asked subdividing landowners why they had sold land. More than 40% listed property taxes as one of the top three reasons. 27% marked it as their number one reason, more than any other cause.

By contrast, development pressure wasn't important. Less than 10% of subdividing landowners cited a “great offer” as a top-three reason why they sold. Even fewer indicated they'd made the decision based on nearby development.



When asked what could have prevented them from subdividing, landowners most commonly picked the vague “personal circumstances.” Second to that, though, was lower property taxes. Half of subdividing owners reported that lower property taxes would have been important in preventing their decision to sell.



Based on their survey, Stone and Tyrrell concluded that property taxes were the greatest cause of subdivision in the New York City Watershed. Watershed landowners reported that the high taxes they face are “a major burden, often tipping the balance toward [subdivision].”

Lack of information may be part of the problem. Stone and Tyrrell found that 54% of subdividing landowners had no idea that cost-saving programs like New York’s Forest Tax Law existed. The authors wrote that their findings were “indicative of an apparent communication problem” with programs like the Forest Tax Law.

Stone and Tyrrell made several policy recommendations based on their research. They advocated switching landowner assistance programs away from traditional forms like management plans and toward “addressing [landowner] financial needs...through tax abatements for protecting and conserving forests.” They went so far as to advocate for a special tax abatement program specifically for the New York City Watershed, where subdivision and development threaten the water supply for nine million people living in and around the United States’ largest city. Finally, they encouraged efforts to promote local natural resource economies, in particular farm, timber, and firewood markets. “Although land-based income will not compete with soaring real estate prices,” they wrote, “it is an added incentive for people who want to keep their land.”