Coordinated regional planning in practice.
When eight municipalities were merged to make one large municipality “Glarus North”, the zoning plan had to be revised. The Mayor, Martin Laupper, and the WSL landscape researcher, Silvia Tobias, on opportunities and challenges in the planning.

Herr Laupper, Glarus North was a case study region in the WSL Research Programme “Room for People and Nature”. Tell us about your municipality!

ML: Glarus North is located at the entrance to Canton Glarus, and is therefore in a privileged position from the point of view of infrastructure as it is, for example, close to the freeway. This makes us an economic motor for the Canton, which should help to attract new jobs. At the same time, we don’t want to cover everything with concrete. We’d like to take advantage of the wonderful recreation areas close by that the region has to offer. This means balancing out the need to be an economic driving force for the whole of Glarus, and the need for people to live and thrive here, enjoying the nearby opportunities for recreation.

ST: Glarus North lies within the sphere of influence of the greater Zurich area and the pressure on housing and infrastructure is correspondingly high. People can live in the countryside here but still commute to work in Zurich. It is just such “peri-urban” regions that we wanted to focus on in our Research Programme.

Glarus North was created in 2011 through the merger of eight municipalities …

ST: … which makes it particularly interesting for us: after the merger, the local planning had to be revised. This takes place regionally because the municipality is so large and is made up of several villages. Glarus North can therefore serve as a model for regionally coordinated planning.

ML: WSL’s Research Programme extended our horizons, and gave us many ideas about what kinds of things are possible. Reforming the structure of the municipality is a cultural challenge, particularly as we have to find a new identity. Confronting such a “soft” factor with the hard facts has enabled a tremendous new dynamic. Large infrastructure projects that had been blocked for decades have suddenly become possible. For example, the bypass for the villages will not only enormously improve the quality of life here, but it will also benefit the rest of the Canton because no longer will everything get stuck in traffic jams. Or take the airfield in Mollis. We took over the site from the military and now plan to convert part of the agricultural zone into a workplace zone. As compensation, we will take other sites out of the industrial zone. This is only possible if you work regionally – where, in a small municipality, can you reduce the
size of the building zone? And now a competence center for helicopters is being set up, which will potentially create around five hundred jobs. This will also benefit local businesses, including restaurants and shops. We estimate that nearly one thousand new jobs could be attracted to the region by the Helicopter Competence Center. This will strengthen our region and make it more attractive for the general public.

ST: Our survey showed that the local people want to live in a lively village. They want, for example, to be able to go out for a drink in the evening. This alone wouldn’t, however, provide enough income for any restaurant to survive. If people in the new jobs go out to lunch, the chances of a restaurant succeeding are greater. The creation of new jobs does not mean that they will necessarily go to local people already living here. New jobs in an area are usually first taken by people who commute there from elsewhere, but they still do, of course, contribute to local development.

The regional planning has thus promoted the economic development the region wants. But if only some of these job-holders live here, then urban sprawl will increase. This goes against the kind of spatial development wanted.

ML: From the point of view of financial policy, we need population growth to have more tax income so that we can improve local infra-
structure. Our aim is to have a population increase of one per cent per year. What matters is how responsibly we tackle spatial planning. For example, we have changed the zoning in all village centers so that the buildings there can be raised to three floors. We try to regulate the inner development and specify conditions to ensure it is attractive. At the same time, housing development outside the villages must remain limited.

Economic development without urban sprawl: are you trying to have your cake and eat it too?

ML: Yes. I don’t know if it will really work, but in our opinion it should be possible.

ST: From a regional point of view, you can have your cake and eat it too by developing the regional centers to become small towns while deliberately cultivating rural qualities in the small villages. People who prefer more urban lifestyles and value, for example, having good public transport connections or close access to the freeway will live in regional centers like Niederurnen or Näfels. Others will prefer to live in a small village such as Filzbach, where they can have a little house in the countryside but seldom a bus. People naturally always want to “have their cake and eat it”, but they know this is not possible. They decide what is more important for them, and then choose where to live accordingly.

ML: In our municipality you can have both!

“Reforming the structure of the municipality is a cultural challenge, particularly as we have to find a new identity.”
Visualisations of the potential development of the residential areas according to WSL’s Programme “Room for People and Nature” in Glarus North until 2030. Possible additional buildings are shown in red. Top: Scenario “Trend” (the development continues as in previous years). Middle: Scenario “Vision” (wishful thinking of the workshop participants). Bottom: Scenario “Pressure” (very strong economic development with, at the same time, little state control). Source: WSL Berichte, No. 35, 2015 (p. 25).
How do you put this into practice? While Glarus North has “guiding principles for spatial development”, which were defined in a participative procedure, now binding agreements with the landowners on land-use planning are needed.

**ML:** We have met with considerable opposition because we have to re-zone 43 hectares of privately owned land previously classified as building land. The revised Spatial Planning Law specifies that building land must not exceed what is needed for the next 15 years. This corresponds in principle with the development we want, but we would like to have more transition mechanisms. The re-zoning involves destroying property values for which we cannot pay compensation even though in most cases we don’t need to. This has naturally provoked opposition. We are also meeting with resistance from the agricultural sector because of the need for space for aquatic environments and from the building sector because of the new building regulations. Everybody has their own particular interests.

**ST:** The approach Glarus North took to involve the local population in a workshop on the future of the municipality is very good. The resulting principles are shared aims, which the majority support. For people to now want individual exceptions is just human nature. But if you can refer to the principles that were agreed on together, then it becomes less easy to justify why just I should be an exception. I am therefore confident that the land-use planning can be implemented – which would set a good example for other Swiss municipalities.

**ML:** We will have a fight on our hands up to the last minute. We may have to agree to make certain compromises in order not to jeopardise the whole undertaking. But I would like to emphasise what Silvia Tobias said: This is not something that we simply dreamt up all on our own in private. We sat down with people and thrashed out the principles. And now we are implementing them.Were the local population not to stand by us, that would be really very frustrating. At the moment many people only see the disadvantages. But we have a great opportunity to make use of the energy to be found in the newly created municipality and the regionally coordinated development!

**ST:** Unfortunately people tend to talk mostly about the disadvantages and take it for granted that they can benefit from the advantages.

**ML:** Exactly. We tend to accept them as if they had just happened on their own. We often fail to see the connections. Only when you really participate in the process do you realize how much you can achieve through spatial development. This, for me personally, was the best experience.  

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