Governor's Growth Planning Council

ANNUAL REPORT

[2002]

Dear Governor Almond,

As the co-chairs of your Growth Planning Council, it is our pleasure to report to you on our second year of work to provide recommendations for better growth planning in Rhode Island. In its first year, the Council focused on evaluating existing state programs and their impacts on sprawl. The information provided by this evaluation of state programs guided the Council's second-year efforts to draft a strategic state investment policy.

Our historic cities, traditional town and village centers, beaches, agricultural lands and forests contribute greatly to the quality of life that is Rhode Island's greatest strength. To maintain and enhance these assets, the Council this year explored the concept of designating "growth centers" -- compact, mixed-use areas in which development would be encouraged through incentives and the elimination of unnecessary regulations that discourage compact growth. Encouraging development in these areas would help restore the vibrancy to communities that have experienced decline and reduce the pressure to develop greenfields. The Council has drafted guidance that can be used to define and promote growth centers and has recommended a cooperative process between municipalities and the state to identify growth centers. With your support we look forward to starting this most important initiative.

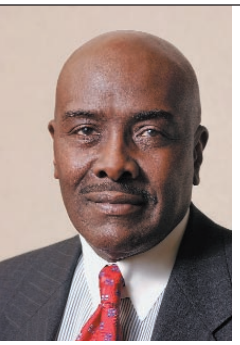
This year the Council also examined infrastructure barriers that limit our ability to promote compact growth. It is clear that water supply infrastructure is the prime constraint to compact growth. To begin to address this crucial issue, we analyzed the obstacles facing the development of new small water supply systems to support compact growth. We also looked at how the existence of water supply infrastructure can lead to unsustainable growth. Recommendations for addressing these issues were drafted. Drinking water supply is an issue that begs more attention from the state as our population continues to grow in rural and suburban areas that may not be prepared, or able, to provide an adequate safe supply.

Progress has been made to increase local capacity to make better land use decisions. Grow Smart Rhode Island convened a coalition of organizations and agencies, several of which are Council members, to implement a new training program for local public officials. The first sessions have been very successful and a number of the agencies represented on the Council have committed to support this important effort. We continue to recommend that the creation of a permanent Planning Institute be a high priority in future state budgets.

As you know, the past year has seen a number of successful initiatives to encourage the redevelopment of brownfields, even though General Assembly did not pass your important legislation to provide tax credits for the restoration and redevelopment of Brownfields sites. The Council and its members will continue to strongly support efforts to encourage the redevelopment of our industrial heritage sites.

Jan Reitsma, Director
RI Department of Environmental Management

Tom Schumpert, Executive Director
RI Economic Development Corporation



THOMAS SCHUMPERT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
RI ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

"Sustainable economic development occurs when the state implements good policies that make use of all of its assets to create jobs and grow business for the betterment of all the citizens of the State of Rhode Island - environmentally, socially, and economically. By providing incentives and working together with our cities and towns, and our commercial and industrial development officials through Brownfield remediation and rehabilitation, the state provides new options and creative solutions for the future growth of businesses in many of our communities."

BROWNFIELDS
REINVESTING IN OUR INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

Last year we concluded our report by highlighting a brownfields success on Bristol's waterfront. This year we begin by reviewing a few of this past year's larger successes that will further encourage investment in our industrial heritage sites.

- Construction costs have been reduced and redevelopers have been given more flexibility by the a newly revised RI Building Code.
- Historic building rehabilitation is now rewarded by the adoption of a tax credit amounting to 30% of approved rehabilitation work. – These credits supplement existing 20% federal credits.
- Municipalities can now take ownership of brownfields projects in both a legal and financial sense without exposing themselves to liability -- new federal and state laws provide for this protection. Other changes were made in state legislation to improve reporting requirements and to request reports on issues of environmental insurance and licensing for rehabilitation professionals.
- Brownfield sites with marginal risk sites are permitted under an expedited process according to new policies adopted by the Department of Environmental Management.
- A revolving loan fund for site cleanup was capitalized using $1 million from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. That money has been committed to projects and another $700,000 has been secured.

One part of the legislative proposals that did not pass this year was a tax credit specifically aimed at brownfields remediation costs. The Council will continue to support that proposal next year.

The Council's diverse membership has elevated and focused public debate on brownfields. Members have become mutually informed of their different perspectives and terminology. This process helped forge consensus on brownfields and holds promise for the other growth issues important to the Council.

The State's new Brownfields website **www.brownfields.state.ri.us** for more information on state programs, financing, new initiatives, or to create maps of restored sites or sites eligible for redevelopment incentives.

The Royal Mill, a remarkable granite Romansque Revival mill on the Pawtuxet River in West Warwick, was part of a Rhode Island-based textile empire. Changing economic times left this mill underutilized or abandoned. These once-proud structures await revitalization -- new uses that celebrate their historical associations and their ties to the communities and the rivers that powered them.

MARILYN F. COHEN, AICP
PRESIDENT,
RI CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

Rhode Island has already been recognized as a Smart Growth State because of progressive enabling legislation for Comprehensive Planning, Zoning, and Subdivision and Land Development. The work of the Growth Planning Council in investigating and recommending a system of Growth Centers and Priority Funding Areas represents another opportunity in Rhode Island for supporting smart growth initiatives.

DR. PATRICIA NOLAN, DIRECTOR
RI HEALTH

"The opportunity to live in a safe and healthy community is an essential part of health. Good housing and healthy schools, safe places for physical activities, access to wholesome foods, clean air and clean water, freedom from toxic exposures are all important to health.

GROWTH CENTERS
A NEW VISION FOR LAND DEVELOPMENT

If we want to be serious about planning for growth, we have to focus on places we care about. Rhode Island has many different types of authentic places, be they Providence's vibrant urban neighborhoods, South County's unspoiled beaches, or the Blackstone River Valley's historic mill villages. Each community has special features that give it identity or on which it depends, from historic structures to working farms, rural lanes to town commons, parks to water reservoirs. These features are key to our maintaining livable communities, and help power our economy as they attract employers, talented workers and visitors.

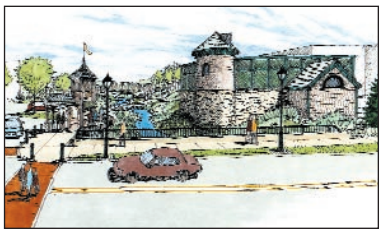
Poorly planned development can destroy the very core of what we care about in the places where we live or work, unless we plan for growth in the right places. This is why the Council proposes that the State invest in Growth Centers, places where development can be accommodated with the necessary infrastructure without depleting a community's resources. The proposal is not to obstruct development outside of Growth Centers, but to give priority to public investments within these areas. By planning ahead, communities can reduce their costs for building and maintaining the infrastructure needed to support residential, commercial, and industrial growth. At the same time, by directing future growth to specific areas the character of the community can be preserved, including historic areas and open space.

The Council does not believe that the State can or should designate these Growth Centers. Instead, cities and towns should do so through the existing comprehensive planning process. The State should encourage and assist in that process. To that end, the Council developed criteria (see sidebar) that municipalities can use to identify Growth Centers, and studied how public investment could encourage growth in them. The Council's special report recommends that the criteria for Growth Centers be formally adopted; a process for Growth Center designation be created; and resources that can be targeted to Growth Centers be identified by state agencies, as well as regulatory changes that can promote growth in these areas.

GROWTH CENTERS SHOULD BE PLACES THAT:

1. Strengthen and encourage growth in existing centers
2. Scale new infrastructure to support compact growth
3. Include mixed land uses
4. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
5. Protect and enhance critical environmental resources
6. Provide a variety of transportation choices
7. Promote community design that contributes to a sense of place
8. Encourage growth in appropriately scaled centers

PROPOSED MIDDLETOWN TOWN CENTER RENDERING



The Town of Middletown has never had a formal town center. They have embraced the idea of creating one using a creative overlay zoning district. The district's goal is to encourage pedestrian friendly designed developments while protecting a public drinking water supply that abuts the area. The "new" town center design standards also apply, as appropriate, to the existing shopping areas near the center. The drawings shown here were drafted to show what the center might look like when built out.

M. PAUL SAMS,
GENERAL MANAGER
RI WATER RESOURCES

When planning for new growth it is critical to resolve issues surrounding the water supply. Sprawl development and higher safe drinking water standards have made it expensive to develop new small systems.

JENNIFER PERKINS, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
RI LEAGUE LEAGUE OF CITIES AND TOWNS

"Training gives local boards the legal foundation to make decisions and provides more predictable outcomes to those who appear before them. Local planning and zoning board members have eagerly participated in the first training sessions offered this year - demonstrating the need to provide continued support for these programs."

TRAINING
MAKING GOOD LAND USE DECISIONS

Municipal officials, staff, citizens and members of the development community must be fluent and comfortable with the principles and practices of planning to make sound land-use decisions.

Last year a Growth Planning Council Task Force recommended a Planning Institute -- a non-profit organization to coordinate, market, and deliver training on planning and land use law and practices to municipal officials, staffs, and others throughout the state.

This year the Council's Task Force took further steps to move the Planning Institute forward. With support from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Task Force hired a consultant to conduct a funding feasibility study. After talking with government agencies, education institutions, business leaders, and in-state and out-of-state foundations, the consultant concluded that there was strong conceptual support for the Planning Institute if there was a significant commitment of annual State funding support.

When it became evident that significant state funding could be provided in the near future, Growth Council efforts turned to supporting training initiated by Grow Smart Rhode Island and a coalition of agencies and organizations. Training began in late fall of 2001, with a nine hour core curriculum covering state and local planning, the roles of various municipal bodies, legal authority and requirements for local planning and review, and the review process itself. By the end of June, 2002, officials from 14 municipalities had received training. Training will resume in the fall, with additional courses supplementing the core curriculum.

Nancy Giorgi, ESQ, is one of the several trainers in the training program organized by Grow Smart which will receive funding through 2003.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we send our second and last report to you we wish you well and will endeavor to continue the progress on the important growth planning issues with the new governor. In addition to continuing work on brownfields, growth centers and training, next year we anticipate working specifically on:

REGIONALISM:

Municipalities share natural and built attributes, and share concerns such as infrastructure needs, economic health and housing demand. We will strive to address these cross-boundary issues in a cooperative, not competitive, fashion. We will support efforts like the creation of a West Side Master Plan for Aquidneck Island which brings the three island communities together to plan for regional employment, transportation, mixed-use development, and open space protection.

PROPERTY TAX POLICY:

The social and fiscal implications of property tax have a profound effect on land use patterns. All Rhode Island communities are facing the problem of increasing property tax burdens on homeowners; urban centers are dealing with limited growth in property values compared to municipal needs, and non-urban communities are dealing with an influx of population and increased demand for services. The Council must continue to address the impacts of shifting property wealth on the economic, environmental, and social health of our communities.

DRINKING WATER SUPPLY:

In the midst of our current drought, the importance of drinking water supply to future growth is apparent. Rapid development in our non-urban communities has put a strain on existing water supplies, and the siting of new sources has a highly significant impact on the location of new development. The Council will think critically on how best to integrate drinking water supply policy with policies for land use planning.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to work cooperatively in a broadly represented Council to address land-use challenges facing our state.

DR. BEVERLY A. SCOTT,
GENERAL MANAGER
RI PUBLIC TRANSIT AUTHORITY

"Public transportation works best when it is supported by transit - friendly development and land use strategies. Establishing viable alternatives to cars requires the broader perspective on community livability and sustainable development that is at the heart of the Growth Council's mandate."

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