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Grow Smart Rhode Island Releases Smart Growth Issue Briefing Book for Gubernatorial Candidates That Advocates Major Changes in Rhode Island's Approach to Economic Development, Tax Policy and Growth Management

PROVIDENCE, RI (JULY 19, 2002) – Grow Smart Rhode Island today released a smart growth issue briefing book for gubernatorial candidates that advocates major changes in Rhode Island's approach to economic development, tax policy and growth management. The book, entitled *A Strategy For Saving Rhode Island From Sprawl and Urban Decay* and comprised of twelve issue papers, is a non-partisan effort to influence the thinking and platforms of the candidates for Governor and increase the awareness of all citizens about Rhode Island's critical growth and economic challenges. In conjunction with the release of the book, Grow Smart has sent a letter to each gubernatorial candidate requesting an opportunity to brief them individually about the book's contents.

According to Scott Wolf, Grow Smart's Executive Director, the briefing book targets gubernatorial candidates because "at the state level, the person occupying the Governor's office is the individual best positioned to provide the vision, coordination, planning and long term perspective required to tackle such critical issues as reforming our approach to economic development, restructuring our property tax system, revitalizing our urban and town centers and finding stable funding sources for critical land conservation and affordable housing needs."

In the briefing book's introduction, Grow Smart notes: "With the incentives and policies outlined in this book, we can protect Rhode Island's special places and sense of place while providing a brighter economic future for generations to come." To highlight the potential influence of the new Governor on future land use trends, Wolf added that "based on the policies that the next Governor implements, the nearly 11,000 vacant lots in our five urban core communities could mushroom over the next two decades to 20,000, or be cut by two-thirds, to only 3,000."

Grow Smart's strategy stresses the link between smart growth and economic development. The organization advises candidates that "What sells Rhode Island to the outside world is beauty, not brawn, and quality of life, not quantity of asphalt."

Grow Smart offers a total of 47 policy recommendations to address the twelve issues covered in the briefing book. In the area of systemic reform, Grow Smart's recommendations include the following:

1. Removing all real estate functions from the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC), including its oversight of Quonset/Davisville, so that it can be a more effective partner with local communities in promoting sound, sustainable economic development.

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2. Addressing the many planning and infrastructure gaps identified in Grow Smart's recent report on the future of Quonset/Davisville.
3. As an alternative to ad hoc economic development and growth policies, establishing a policy that identifies and targets funding to local growth centers. These are centers where compact, environmentally responsible, socially equitable development can occur that will reduce sprawl and increase job opportunities, especially for those most in need of economic advancement.
4. Reducing the reliance on the property tax to fund local education, and in the process reducing incentives for sprawl development while strengthening the economic competitiveness of cities. Grow Smart recommends careful review of several different property tax reform approaches instituted recently in such states as Vermont, Michigan and Minnesota.
5. Adopting a more integrated and balanced transportation policy to increase alternatives to intensive automobile use and confront the transportation funding crisis that's been documented by RIPEC and others.
6. Elevating the status and power of the Statewide Planning Office to provide more coordination and focus for long range land use planning.

Another set of Grow Smart's recommendations pinpoint ways to revitalize Rhode Island's numerous urban and town centers. Included are proposals for a state brownfields redevelopment income tax credit, an Urban Revitalization Fund and establishment of a stable funding source for full implementation of the Neighborhood Opportunities Program's affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization activities.

Grow Smart's briefing book also stresses the need to expand Rhode Island's capacity for growth management, in part by continuing the regular training for local officials in land use decision making launched by Grow Smart within the last year. Another recommended boost for growth management is linking and strengthening land conservation and affordable housing efforts by exploring the establishment of a reliable funding stream for the Rhode Island Housing and Open Space Trust Fund, an entity that was created in 1990 but that has never been funded. Discouraging large lot zoning is also put forward as a useful tool for land conservation and growth management.

In addition to transmitting the briefing book to candidates for statewide and federal offices, Grow Smart will be posting the book on its web site-- www.growsmartri.com -- so that the general public and candidates for other offices will have access to it. The issue papers in Grow Smart's briefing book reflect Grow Smart's priorities as well as the substantive expertise of the many members of its coalition who were consulted in the book's preparation. Each issue paper includes a summary of the issue's key elements, a set of recommended solutions, and sources for further information (most of which can be accessed on the Internet). The full briefing book is attached to this press release.