



Grow Smart!

NEWSLETTER OF GROW SMART RHODE ISLAND

DECEMBER 2001

State Poised to Adopt Powerful Incentives for Urban Revitalization

Looking at a century-old photograph of a downtown Providence street scene—a time before the automobile, Route 95, and the flight to the suburbs—it's easy to be struck with elements that often seem unattainable in our modern cities: plenty of people and plenty of street-level commerce. For all of the



*The 1899 Lilly Building, Westminster Street, Providence
Photo 1907, Courtesy R.I. Historical Society*

mixed zoning, noise, and often unpleasant stimuli of turn-of-the-20th century urban life, there is an unmistakable vitality in these images. Cities were places to live, work, shop, go to school, dine, and walk. How are we to recreate this *livability*, this vitality that speaks to us through old images?

Thanks to the efforts of a wide range of individuals and groups, Rhode Island stands poised to effect a package of urban and town center revitalization measures that would make us a national pacesetter. We could soon see a trend reversing decades of greenfield development and disinvestment in urban and town centers. Here's a look at these incentives.

Last year, after a major push by Grow Smart and a coalition of more than forty other groups, Rhode Island



The Armory Revival Company's restoration of the Lilly Building, a mixed-use project that will provide street-level commercial space and residential lofts.

signed into law the country's most generous **commercial historic tax credit** to accompany the expansion of the state residential Historic Preservation Tax Credit achieved the previous year. Commercial rehab of historic structures can now qualify for a combined 50% tax credit (20% federal and 30% state credit).

Through adoption of a multi-year initiative, the **Neighborhood Opportunities Program**, Rhode Island state government has made its first significant financial commitment to affordable housing and neighborhood

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Welcome to Grow Smart!

We welcome you to the inaugural issue of our newsletter. Grow Smart Rhode Island was formed as a non-profit organization in 1998 by people concerned that the Rhode Island we cherish--historic urban neighborhoods, open spaces, unspoiled coastline, charming mill villages--may not exist much longer if we continue sprawling and abandoning our cities. We believe that we can and must grow smart by changing the low-density, sprawling development patterns of the last fifty years and by increasing the incentives for reclaiming existing developed land, buildings, and neighborhoods. We hope that this newsletter will serve as a voice for all those who share our sense of urgency about promoting the changes in policy and thinking that will ensure our long-term economic, social, and environmental vitality.



From the Executive Director

Smart Growth is smart economics

Scott Wolf

For me smart growth means strengthening our economy as well as expanding opportunity for all citizens and protecting our special places. However, some people reject the idea that smart growth encourages economic growth. For those skeptics I'd like to offer reasons why those committed to boosting our economy and economic opportunity should be strong supporters of Grow Smart Rhode Island.

In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, declining economic activity and revenues are constraining state and local budgets. This puts a premium on spending public dollars efficiently. Our recent report, *The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island*, demonstrates that perpetuating our sprawling development pattern could cost Rhode Island taxpayers nearly one and a half billion dollars more over the next twenty years than a land use scenario that is modestly more compact and urban (but in which two-thirds of new residential housing units would still be located in our suburban and rural areas).

If we can save one and a half billion dollars by growing smarter, that will put more money in Rhode Islanders' pockets and increase our ability to make critical investments in areas that pay dividends, such as education and infrastructure improvements.

Skeptics may still ask why we should be particular about where we promote and allow development if our ultimate goal is simply to create more jobs. This perspective overlooks the fact that **continued sprawl will choke off our long-term opportunity for economic growth in at least two ways.** First, it will undermine the quality of life and charm of Rhode Island's countryside and coastline—major selling points for tourists and out-of-state CEO's looking to relocate their businesses. As noted recently by the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council in its *Rhode Island Economic Strategy*, "In a world where companies and the talent that drives them can locate anywhere, quality of place is more important, not less important." Secondly, sprawling development generates more traffic congestion which results in higher costs for shipping goods and more employee time wasted in unproductive activity.

In recent years Rhode Island has shed the dubious distinction of being a New England economic laggard as it has gained economic momentum and self-esteem. I am convinced that adopting new, aggressive smart growth policies and practices will ensure that our economic advancement can continue and be enjoyed by more of our citizens.

Fortunately, Rhode Island has many enlightened business leaders who recognize the connection between smart growth and economic growth. Some serve on our Board and have helped us promote such pro-growth policies as a commercial historic tax credit, a user-friendly rehab code, expanded opportunities for affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization, new incentives for Brownfield redevelopment and the open space protection that helps our communities market their quality of life to the outside world.

To make Rhode Island all that it can be, we have to keep pushing for these kinds of smart growth, pro-growth initiatives. And we must recognize that in the long run smart growth will be a key to Rhode Island's economic success and to maximizing all Rhode Islanders' opportunity to pursue the American Dream.

Smart growth is smart economics!

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Scott Wolf
Executive Director

Grow Smart!

The newsletter of
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www.growsmartri.com

345 South Main St.
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Finding an Economic Strategy that Makes Sense for Rhode Island's "Growth Belt"

How can Washington County communities achieve a stable economic base that provides quality jobs and tax revenues to support community services while, at the same time, protecting the region's environment, greenspace, and community character?

That's the critical question that the Washington County Sustainable Economy Planning Project, co-sponsored by the Washington County Regional Planning Council and Grow Smart Rhode Island, is designed to answer. The project encompasses Washington County's eight mainland communities plus neighboring West Greenwich and is intended to help create a regional vision and strategy for an economic future that makes sense for South County.

Working with Town Council-appointed committees, the consulting firms of Taintor & Associates and Dodson Associates will assist communities and the region in defining local and regional economic goals, identifying specific types of economic development that are suited to the region and that the region can reasonably hope to attract, identifying and mapping areas suitable for economic growth and/or expansion, and integrating economic planning and development across town boundaries.

The project will provide local decision-makers with the data that individual communities and the region as a whole need to make informed decisions. "This work aims to identify the level and type of economic growth that each community desires," notes Michael Rauh, facilitator for the Washington County Regional Planning Council. Rauh also explained that project recommendations will be coordinated with the results of the ongoing Green Space Protection Project, in which Washington County communities are prioritizing land for conservation. "Coordinating the two projects will help towns tackle the challenge of balancing whatever level of economic growth they desire with other community priorities."

While it will take a regional perspective, the project is also intended to be a community-based process and to meet the varying needs of the different communities. For example, one community may recognize that it has a zoning problem that needs to be addressed, a second



As seen in these Randall Arendt illustrations, commercial or retail economic development can be accommodated in compact ways that preserve community character

may need ideas on marketing, and a third may need to solve an infrastructure limitation. While the project will not be able to provide complete answers to all these questions, the consultants will work to identify specific strategies for each community as well as to weave the individual local strategies into an overall, region-wide, economic strategy. Meetings with the task forces in most of the target communities are under way, and the anticipated completion date is June, 2002.

"This project is part of the effort that the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is funding to help increase Washington County's capacity to handle its rapid growth and shape its future," commented Grow Smart Rhode Island's Executive Director Scott Wolf. "We were pleased to be able to assemble the funding for the project and work with the Washington County

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The Housing Network: a Key Smart Growth Partner



In this first issue of Grow Smart! we are spotlighting the work of a key partner in smart growth, The Housing Network.

No matter how you look at it, Rhode Island has an affordable housing crisis.

- According to federal standards, decent and affordable housing means a safe, well-maintained place to live and a monthly rent amounting to no more than 30% of your gross monthly income. In Rhode Island, you have to earn \$12.87/hr. — more than double the minimum wage — to afford a decent place to call home.
- According to *Kids Count*, 46% of Rhode Island's renters are unable to afford the fair market rent for a two-bedroom unit. In fact, as of the year 2000, our state ranked near the bottom nationally in rental affordability, surpassed by New York and Hawaii—two of the least affordable states in the union.
- Even if those renters could magically double their salaries, apartments in the “affordable” category are few and far between.
- For many, it comes down to a choice between substandard housing or emergency shelter. In a one-year period (1999-2000), Rhode Island saw a 16% increase in the population seeking emergency shelter—and the bulk of these were families.
- Rhode Island's home ownership rate hovers around 60-62%, considerably below the national average of 68%. This home ownership rate drops dramatically in our older urban neighborhoods.

And to date, Rhode Island as a state hasn't done much about the crisis. Neighboring Massachusetts spends six times more per capita on affordable housing than Rhode Island.

This is the crisis that the Housing Network tackles daily. The Housing Network, a non-profit association, was formed in the early 90s by sixteen non-profit community development corporations (CDCs) then working independently on a wide range of housing projects. The CDCs realized that they needed a forum to make it easier to communicate ideas and interact with other groups with a similar mission; they needed a legislative and lobbying arm in state government; and they needed to identify the array of federal, state, and private funding sources that make housing happen and make this information available to those who needed it. With the help of LISC-RI, R.I. Housing, and the R.I. Foundation, the Housing Network

was created to meet those needs. Almost a decade later, The Housing Network now represents 24 housing corporations, providing an indispensable service to the housing community.

For Grow Smart Rhode Island, the Housing Network is a valued partner, with the two organizations working closely on issues that concern us both. What are these shared concerns? What's the connection between affordable housing and suburban sprawl?



A view of Ashton Mill Village in Cumberland, a well-preserved example of the worker housing developed by 19th-century textile mill owners. These villages, a vital part of the Rhode Island landscape, offer great potential for revitalization and affordable housing.

A strategy for smart growth needs to look at the complex dynamic between suburban sprawl and urban decay and how this affects housing stock. Smart growth requires social equity and vibrant neighborhoods and that translates into a fundamental objective: everybody needs a decent place to live. Urban and town center revitalization—embracing mixed use, reinvesting in the urban core, encouraging historical preservation, promoting transportation choices, tax incentives, and more—recreates livable communities for a wide range of incomes and backgrounds.

Brenda Clement, Executive Director of The Housing Network and a member of our Advisory Council, believes that “A big part of smart growth is urban and village center revitalization and that's our concern as well. Work in the rehabbing and reuse of existing buildings or revitalization of brownfields is development that focuses on the urban core—development that isn't moving outward into our state's greenspace.”

A common misunderstanding of smart growth is that it is concerned exclusively with open space and
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Dorothy Dauray of Grow Smart Recognized as Rhode Island's Outstanding Older Worker

The National Prime Time Awards Program, the nation's premier older worker recognition initiative, highlights the valuable contributions older Americans make to their communities and places of work. This year, the recipient of Rhode Island's Outstanding Older Worker Award was Grow Smart's Office Assistant, Dorothy Dauray.

Dorothy came to Grow Smart in August 2000 through a placement from the R.I. Department of Elderly Affairs. Since that time she has become an indispensable part of our team--she's also a joy to have around. Congratulations, Dorothy, from the staff of Grow Smart.



Marilyn Sayles (r) of the R.I. Department of Elderly Affairs presents the award to Office Assistant Dorothy Dauray (l).

Smart Growth Adopted as Guiding Principle for RI Economic Strategy

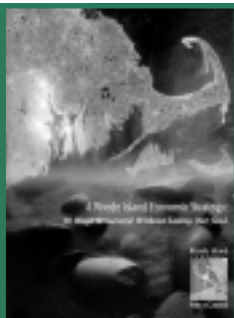
Smart growth policies are a major component of a recently released economic strategy for Rhode Island developed by the state's Economic Policy Council (EPC). *A Rhode Island Economic Strategy: 10 Ways to Succeed Without Losing Our Souls* pinpoints as one of its guiding principles "sustaining the competitive advantage of our state's unique sense of place."

Throughout the EPC's blueprint there is a strong emphasis on pursuing environmentally friendly economic development policies and promoting many of the tools championed by Grow Smart Rhode Island for urban and town center revitalization. According to the EPC strategy, "As we develop our vision for Rhode Island in the new economy, we must fiercely protect our natural resources. We must take an environmentally responsible approach to all development, nurturing cities, neighborhoods and village centers as compact, vibrant places that can serve as magnets for growth and a hedge against

sprawl." When EPC gets down to specifics, they recommend such tools and policies for revitalization as "a separate building code for rehabilitation of older buildings, incentives for rehabilitation of historic structures, business improvement districts, and smart growth land use policy." EPC also urges the state to "take steps to accelerate the reuse of potentially contaminated properties..." through a number of policy actions.

In the months ahead, we look forward to working with the EPC to translate much of this strategy into action. To succeed we will need buy-in from our major governmental leaders at the state and local level and from such key agencies as DEM and the Economic Development Corporation. Much work remains to be done, but the content of the EPC's economic strategy is another sign that Grow Smart's policy ideas are gaining momentum and broad acceptance.

Copies of A Rhode Island Economic Strategy can be obtained from the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, 3 Davol Square, Providence, RI 02903 (401 521-3120).



Copies of The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island can be obtained from Grow Smart RI, 345 S. Main Street, Providence, RI 02903 (401 273-5711).



Grow Smart Initiates Municipal Training Program: *Making Good Land-Use Decisions*

Rhode Island's cities and towns are all struggling in one way or another with issues of economic and residential growth, and municipal Councils, Boards and Commissions are on the front lines of the struggle. In rural and outlying suburban municipalities, the challenge is to accommodate a reasonable amount of growth without altering the community character and quality of life that residents value. In more densely populated areas, the challenge is to incorporate in-fill development and rehabilitation of older structures to revitalize historic city and town centers and ensure their full, productive use.

A RESPONSE TO LOCAL NEEDS

The volunteer citizen planners who sit on Councils, Boards and Commissions often express the need for training to increase their capacity to make good land-use decisions — decisions that are both legally defensible and that promote a community's goals and objectives. Responding to that need, a coalition of organizations and agencies convened by Grow Smart

In rural and outlying areas, the challenge is to accommodate a reasonable amount of growth without altering the community character and quality of life that residents value

Rhode Island is rolling out a new training program for local public officials. The two-part program began on Aquidneck Island on November 29 and December 6. Training will be offered in different areas throughout the state in 2002 beginning in the winter and early spring.

Entitled *Making Good Land-Use Decisions*, the program's content responds to the areas that elected officials and board and commission members identified on a statewide survey as their greatest needs for training. In the first component, participants will heighten their understanding of the Local Comprehensive Plan as the foundation for local land-use decisions, learn about their authority to regulate land use and learn how to make defensible decisions by following legally-required procedures and recommended practices. The second component

provides participants with a model for analyzing requests and reaching decisions based on legal criteria and the goals and objectives of the Local Comprehensive Plan. Participants will receive both a training manual and a handbook containing relevant state legislation.



Sound decision-making and innovative land-use strategies can prevent the suburban sprawl that erodes community character.

The two-part program is the first of a number of training sessions that the coalition plans to develop. Later sessions will focus on such areas as site plan review, conservation zoning, and smart growth tools. The training is sponsored by a coalition of organizations and agencies including American Planning Association/RI Chapter, Blackstone Valley Institute, Grow Smart Rhode Island, Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns, Rhode Island Builders Association, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program, URI Coastal Resources Center, and the URI Cooperative Extension Program. Funding for the training is provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the John H. Chafee Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission.

Dates and locations for training programs in other parts of the state in the winter and spring of 2002 are currently being set. Officials and municipal staffs will receive mailings with dates and registration information, and further information will also be provided on Grow Smart's web page, www.growsmartri.com.

We need your help!

To help Grow Smart continue to play a leadership role in policy and public education, please help us with a tax-deductible contribution of:

- \$35** **\$75** **\$100**
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Please make your check payable to Grow Smart Rhode Island and mail to us at 345 South Main Street, Providence, RI 02903

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Washington County, continued

Regional Planning Council and individual towns to coordinate the project.”

The Sustainable Economy Planning Project is funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, by Community Development Block Grant funds awarded through participating communities for Washington County Regional Planning Council activities and by grants from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, the Rhode Island Foundation, the Rhode Island Sea Grant Program, and the Sharpe Family Foundation.

Did you know?

According to Grow Smart’s *The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island*:

All of Rhode Island’s rural communities will lose their rural character by the end of this century if sprawl continues unabated.

There are approximately 11,000 vacant lots in Rhode Island’s five urban core communities. In twenty years, our report projects, this figure could shrink to 3,000 or mushroom to 20,000 depending on the kind of development pattern we establish.

The Housing Network, continued

environmental issues—clearly a non-urban focus. Both Grow Smart Rhode Island and The Housing Network see urban disinvestment and suburban sprawl as two sides of the same problem: in the 20th century we abandoned our core cities, causing a tremendous drop in real estate value and revenue and a mounting struggle on the part of city governments to provide essential services to an increasingly impoverished population. While this was going on, we rushed headlong into the rural areas of the state, demanded the services we had grown accustomed to in the cities, drew urban commerce to outlying shopping centers, and grew more and more dependent on automobile use. This cycle of outward sprawl and abandonment of cities played itself out over many decades, and today’s housing crisis is a significant result.

Because 90% of the state’s housing stock predates 1940, the repair, maintenance, and lead abatement issues associated with this housing are tremendous. And, while many would agree that reinvesting in our urban, town and village centers is important, the process is often complicated by current tax law and market forces.

The Housing Network values the forum that Grow Smart provides for discussion of their issues in the broader context of environmental issues, land conservation, planning, and historical preservation. Brenda sums it up in this way: “Because of Grow Smart, these different constituencies can get together around the same table and discuss things—and that wouldn’t happen in the normal course of events.”

Powerful incentives, continued

revitalization. On a per capita basis Rhode Island spends only a small fraction of the money spent by our neighboring states on affordable housing despite the fact that last year we were ranked 47th nationally in affordability for renters. The N.O.P. is designed to provide nearly 2000 units of affordable housing over the next ten years--about half through rehab, and the other half through new construction. It also will make grants available to communities to implement neighborhood revitalization plans. Additional funding will be required too meet these goals and Grow Smart will continue to promote these investments.

As we go to press funding for the N.O.P. has been frozen by the Almond administration. Grow Smart has objected strongly to this action, urging Governor Almond to release the funds for this vital human and capital investment program. We intend to maintain our aggressive public education efforts on behalf of the N.O.P. and believe we have a reasonable chance of success.

Grow Smart led a successful effort last year mandating the establishment of a **streamlined, user-friendly**

rehab code to reduce the time, expense, and unpredictability of bringing older buildings back to life for residential, commercial, and industrial uses. We have subsequently participated in a committee working out the details of that code. A draft code is now finalized and likely to be the subject of a public hearing in early January.

Rhode Island has more than 300 **brownfield** commercial and industrial sites, many in our urban and town centers. To put these distressed properties back into productive use, we need more financial incentives, better insurance packages, and a quicker regulatory approval process for cleanup and redevelopment. With our support, a House legislative commission has been established to raise the visibility of the issue and propose legislation for next year's General Assembly that promotes more brownfield redevelopment. Through our February 2001 statewide brownfields conference and the development of a number of policy recommendations, we are also seeing better coordination of brownfields programs between DEM and EDC as well as improved tools to market brownfields sites.

Grow Smart Rhode Island

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