

# Growing, Growing, Gone: Can Smart Growth Planning Save Paradise?

Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot

-Joni Mitchell

## "First do no harm..."

If coastal managers and land-use planners had to take a version of the Hippocratic Oath, would we be where we are today? Even the most well-intentioned plans can have unfortunate consequences.

## Going for the Brass Ring

Portland, Oregon's urban growth boundary—a ring separating the developable urban core from the untouchable outlying rural areas—has its proponents, but it has also been labeled by *The Washington Times* part of a "disastrous" regional planning effort. Critics contend that the growth boundary has caused drastic increases in housing prices, squeezing out low-income residents, while allowing loopholes for the wealthy who can still obtain multi-acre properties outside the growth boundary by calling them farms. A 1999 study by the Reason Public Policy Institute reported that 90 percent of farms with less than 160 acres where new houses were authorized in the 1980s reported no farm receipts.

Late last night I heard my screen door slam.  
A big yellow bulldozer took away the house and the land.  
-Bob Dylan

Closer to home, urban renewal of the 1950s was planning by bulldozer—the old, small, and run-down was razed to make way for the new, big, and improved. Urban renewal, however, could not stem the flow of residents from the cities to the suburbs and shoppers from downtown retailers to the malls. The city of Pawtucket has long been trying to restore luster to its downtown, which once housed a busy retail trade. At one point in the 1980s, the city tried luring retailers and customers back downtown, closing a street to automobiles to encourage pedestrian traffic. More recently the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council received a \$900,000 grant for a ferry service, initially marketed towards commuters, to run from Pawtucket to Providence to help revitalize Pawtucket's waterfront. Unfortunately, it takes 35 minutes longer to reach Providence by ferry than by car, and the Providence dock is located on Point Street—not the heart of the business district. When the grant money ran out, the ferries were put up for sale.

## Smart Growth or Taste Test?

A planning and development idea that has taken hold in the last several years and that came to the forefront during the 2000 presidential campaign is the "smart growth" movement. According to the Smart Growth Network:

The features that distinguish smart growth in a community vary from place to place. In general, smart growth invests time, attention, and resources in restoring community and vitality to center cities and older suburbs. New smart growth is more town-centered, is transit- and pedestrian-oriented, and has a greater mix of housing, commercial, and retail uses. It also preserves open space and many other environmental amenities. ... Successful communities ... tend to have one thing in common—a vision of where they want to go and of what things they value in their community—and their plans for development reflect these values.

*-Executive summary of Why Smart Growth: A Primer by International City/County Management Association with Geoff Anderson.*

An article in the National Review cast a cynical eye on both urban renewal and smart growth schemes, accusing smart-growth proponents of being elitists with a "distaste for suburban life" and the "uneducated" suburbanites who create sprawl. As for planners, the article asks, "Why should we let the government and the planners who failed so badly at urban renewal try their hand at suburban renewal?"

As a planner with Edwards & Kelcey, a consulting firm in Providence, Deirdra Storti is aware of this criticism. "Planning is ever-evolving," she says, adding that planners are constantly learning by studying project outcomes, talking to other planners, and attending planning conferences. "There isn't one set miracle piece of data that you can use to plug into each situation."

Storti says, "Smart growth can be elitist—its strategies constantly need to be refined and examined," which, she points out, is something planners do: "They call it 'GRAPE,'" she says, "Set goals, do research, devise alternative plans, implement plans, and evaluate the results." After urban renewal, she contends, planners examined the results, and today's planners have benefited. Nevertheless, "How do you weigh competing needs? There's no easy answer. It's why smart growth techniques are important to have." She says that smart growth techniques have become accepted by many planners, and have infiltrated federal, state, and local government. Now, she says, Edwards & Kelcey sees requests for proposals from towns and states that include smart growth goals. "Consultants are bound to do what the client wants," she points out. They are not paid directly by the public, so if the government entity contracting consulting

services asks for a plan to turn their community into a concrete jungle, that's what they'll get.

### **Exeter in the Balance**

No one, of course, wants to do that. But what happens when groups disagree on what's good for the community? A recent issue that incited passions in Rhode Island was the proposed redevelopment of the 331-acre Ladd Center in Exeter, which closed in 1984 as a state facility for the mentally retarded. A couple of subsequent attempts to reuse the property never got past the planning stage. Then, three years ago, the state charged the R.I. Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC) with developing a master plan for the site. With the approval of the town council, the RIEDC formulated a plan for creating a research and technology park that would employ 3,000 people and house a Job Corps training center for disadvantaged youths.

The plan met a number of the goals and proposed actions of the Washington County "vision document" that was created with input from numerous representatives of various Washington County interests—from Realtors to land trusts—drafted by the Washington County Regional Planning Council, and distributed in the South County edition of *The Providence Journal*. Goals for the county include creating education, employment, and training opportunities that attract and keep a skilled labor force. Proposed actions include preserving open space, attracting new "clean businesses" to help share the tax burden and create new jobs, and engaging the University of Rhode Island (URI) in supporting local business ventures.

Looking at these criteria, the RIEDC must have felt that they had a sure winner—they had cleaned up the ground contaminants that would have prevented reuse, reserved over 100 acres for a perpetual conservation area, promised that the developable acres would be sold only to nonpolluting industries such as research and technology firms, set aside 10 acres for Exeter that could be used for a school, and contacted URI to help seed new business ventures. And the town would reap over \$2 million in additional tax revenues, potentially lowering residential property taxes.

But Washington County residents also feared that the county was becoming a sprawling suburb of Providence and losing its small-town character, that development was occurring in environmentally sensitive areas, and that traffic congestion was increasing. Sheila Brush, GrowSmart Rhode Island program director, says that "research and technology as a form of business in Rhode Island is something we all would support but this isn't the logical place to do it. Ladd is in a rural town, on an aquifer. There's poor transportation access, it's far from the urban center, and far from the labor pool." She contends that the plan would contribute to sprawl and traffic congestion. "Three thousand employees are far more than would be attracted from Exeter and the surrounding towns."

J. Dennis Maloney, RIEDC associate director for planning and development, defended the project's location and proposed use at the time. "We had a very open planning process," getting input from environmental groups and from the townspeople of Exeter. "DEM (R.I. Department of Environmental Management) has been our guide." EDC invested in 20 impact studies as part of the master planning process, and "only a third of the land will be developed. We think that's representative of some pretty nice sustainable development," Maloney said.

Eventually the project, except for the Job Corps, was scuttled in the face of opposition, but the larger question of what kind of development is good development remains.

### **Meanwhile, Back at the Farm...**

In Washington County, residential subdivisions are surging, quaintly named after the farms and fields they supplant. Beloved by residents for the sense of community and safety they impart, they are criticized by planners as "failures" that exclude lower-income members and contribute to traffic congestion, school overcrowding, and consumption of fossil fuels that feed dependence on automobiles.

So who's right? When an issue becomes divisive, it's very hard to tell. Once a specific proposal for a project is on the table, Storti says, it's difficult to reach consensus among conflicting interests. To do good planning, "you need to nurture relationships between different interests, get people to notice their commonalities. It's virtually impossible to do that when there's a proposal on the table." She advocates the use of well-designed surveys, such as willingness-to-pay surveys, that gauge the public's commitment to various projects, and comprehensive planning, which is proactive and requires public participation. "Comprehensive plans are the foundation for all other tools communities use to guide development. They also provide continuity—otherwise, you'd have different agendas constantly guiding the planning process." She says that the plans should be specific, with direct outcomes in mind, because consultants take them into account to justify the intentions of a project.

### **Ch-ch-ch-changes**

Jim Lucht, a planner with URI Cooperative Extension (URI/CE) and the Providence Plan, a nonprofit planning organization, would agree. "There are ways to get better development. Unfortunately, it gets to be adversarial because of resistance to development, with people not wanting any change," Lucht says. He feels that towns must deal with the fact that "people are going to move down here to Washington County and they're going to work in Providence." He says that URI/CE offers technical assistance to communities for things like Geographic Information Systems and alternative septic systems and other ways to mitigate

negative environmental impacts from inevitable development.

But their biggest challenge is, "It's hard to get towns and developers to do things differently." Allowing for flexibility in design rules as promoted by some smart growth thinkers makes towns nervous. "Bad cluster development has left a bad taste in a lot of people's mouths," Lucht says. Also, "Towns have to be convinced the developer isn't getting something over on them," and the town planners feel that regulations that are set in stone, such as setbacks and buffer zones, assure that there are checks on how development will impact environmental quality. Meanwhile, wetland buffers might not really provide that much protection to a wetland if certain vulnerable soil types exist outside of the buffer zone and are built upon. It may be better in some places, Lucht says, to develop closer to the wetland and avoid certain soils. He adds that the technical assistance from URI/CE can help towns and developers identify soil constraints.

Developers, too, must be convinced of the value of greener development techniques. "Developers need certainty in the development process—they have loans to carry," Lucht says. They might be reluctant to hire landscape architects to help them design more environmentally friendly developments. However, Lucht points out, "These developments tend to retain property value and increase in value faster than traditional developments, and developers' profits will be higher."

Lucht has found that Rhode Island towns want Rhode Island examples of successful sustainable development that match their own goals. When outreach educators go to towns with examples that don't fit the towns' needs, their efforts often backfire. And there are knowledge gaps to be filled. When URI/CE provided source water assessment maps to Tiverton, the town asked, "How do we use these?" So URI/CE offered training. But this highlights another issue in putting concepts into practice, as Lucht indicates: "Towns can't hire private consultants every time they need an answer and there are only so many people with the necessary expertise to go around" giving free advice.

One group that has also done municipal training in sustainability is Rhode Island Sea Grant. Although Sea Grant Extension has traditionally kept both oars in the water—as a fisheries and coastal management resource—impacts resulting from increasing development on Narragansett Bay and the coastline have brought Sea Grant outreach further inland. The seeds of Sea Grant's Sustainable Coastal Communities program were sown seven years ago when officials on Aquidneck Island approached Rhode Island Sea Grant/Coastal Resources Center (CRC) with a simple idea for doing a series of training workshops for municipal officials.

"This was the first time in a long time the municipalities got together to work on a project," Jennifer McCann, Sea Grant Extension Sustainable Coastal Communities program co-leader, remembers. "We asked them, 'What are the

issues?' We asked about marinas and public access, areas that were traditionally coastal issues and that we had expertise in. People were interested in open space and greenways, which are not traditional coastal management issues."

Inspired by the idea that "if you don't know where you're going, any road will do," the Aquidneck Island Partnership, which grew out of Sea Grant/CRC's involvement, decided that it needed a vision provided by Aquidneck Islanders. The partnership began a series of personal interviews and public workshops that ultimately recorded the ideas of 500 people, and these ideas were incorporated into a vision plan for the island. Other publications were designed to give decisionmakers facts on the environmental, social, and economic reasons for preserving open space.

### **Midwives of the Renaissance**

It takes a champion, however, to take these tools and put them to work.

For the city of Pawtucket, Pat Zacks is just such a person. Owner of The Camera Werks in Providence and president of the newly formed group Pawtucket Arts, Zacks is both realistic about Pawtucket's prospects and enthusiastic about promoting the city to artists. The days of the textile mills are over, but the buildings remain throughout the city, and Zacks says that these old empty mill buildings make perfect artists' studios. And the city in 1999 became an arts district, meaning that Pawtucket artists can sell their works free of sales tax, and are exempt from state income tax on the profits of their art. But some people are more familiar with the city's working class roots and don't know what to make of Pawtucket's attempts at rebirth: "We also need to consider the residents who remember the city the way it used to be. This is something new and it is an education on all levels." She adds that the artists are reaching out to the community through upcoming studio tours, classes, and festivals.

"We are fortunate to have many well-recognized artists in our city," Zacks says, including Gretchen Dow Simpson, whose paintings have illustrated the cover of The New Yorker magazine, and glass sculptor Howard Ben Tre, whose sited public art can be seen at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence and throughout the United States and overseas. "Unfortunately, most of our artists are earning their living outside of Rhode Island," Zacks says. Making potential landlords, renters, and art buyers aware of Pawtucket's renaissance requires a strong communications effort. That's why she runs an e-mail list that serves as a link among the artists, the city, and the state. It began last year with 25 artists and has grown to a network of over 130 artists this year.

Zacks is excited about an upcoming convergence celebration to be held in Pawtucket from September 7 to 23, hoping it will spawn some sculpture that will be permanently on display throughout the city, and about the city's sale of the old armory building to the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm theater and bringing students in

to work with artists.

And development in Providence has benefited its neighboring city in expected and unexpected ways-when the Providence Place mall was built, Stone Soup coffee house, one of the oldest such groups in New England, found its attendance dwindling as it lost free parking spaces, says Herbert Weiss, program manager for development projects in Pawtucket's department of planning and redevelopment. So Stone Soup packed up and moved to Slater Mill and is seeing its receipts start to bounce back. And unlike larger metropolitan areas, Weiss notes, "Space is very affordable." He has a database that is available to artists and businesses looking for industrial and commercial space that lists square footage and location of properties and links real estate agents with property owners and potential buyers or tenants.

Weiss would agree with Zacks that communication is key. "It's all about customer service. You can't have a mentality like a beaurocrat when you're pitching your city," he says. As for converting mills to new uses, "You can't tell private property owners what to do, but you can educate them about what they can do" to renovate their buildings into studios or new commercial space.

Downtown Pawtucket is finding itself home to services that have replaced retail uses: a storefront church shares its residence with a Dunkin Donuts and a Labor Ready facility, the Department of Motor Vehicles relocated to the site of an old downtown department store from Providence in 1994, and the Boys and Girls club has become so popular that it is expanding into a former bank building. Weiss hopes that his efforts will bring other types of commerce to the city, mentioning that the old Carol Cable Mill is nearly filled to capacity with new tenants, and a major hotel is planned for the site of a defunct car dealership. And the ferries? They are now offering "Historic Providence Harbor Cruise Tours" through August for tourists, while their ultimate fate remains in limbo, although Blackstone Valley Tourism hopes to keep one afloat in the future. Meanwhile, Pawtucket is in the process of updating its 1995 comprehensive plan, section by section, says Karen Godin, Pawtucket senior planner.

And even if Pawtucket and other cities are "recovering" from urban renewal, urban renewal itself spurred some city champions to form preservation societies, which found funds and new uses for historic properties, saving buildings on Benefit Street in Providence, in Newport, and in other cities throughout the state.

As for Portland, despite the criticism, its growth management remains the standard other communities aspire to. Some contend the growth boundary has increased racial equity and improved the fortunes of minority homeowners who saw their property values rise as population within the boundary increased. And it has encouraged infill and limited sprawl, in part by leading developers to reconsider properties they once might have dismissed.

"If you do things right, you have a no-lose situation," Lucht says. Getting to right is the challenge, but as history has shown, it can be done by those who, like Janus, look clearly at the past and into the future.

**For more information:**

On Pawtucket's arts renaissance: Contact Herbert Weiss, Program Manager for Development Projects, Department of Planning and Redevelopment, 175 Main St., Pawtucket, RI 02860.

On the Pawtucket/Providence Ferries: Contact Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, 401-724-2200, waterferry@aol.com.

On sustainable coastal communities and tools:

URI Special Initiative on Sustainable Communities: <http://www.edc.uri.edu/sust-comm>

Rhode Island Sea Grant Sustainable Coastal Communities: <http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu/scc>

Rapid Site Assessment, a guide for screening-level review of land development projects using GIS: <http://www.edc.uri.edu/cewq/rapid/>

On development/sprawl:

The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island: Executive Summary. Prepared for GrowSmart Rhode Island by H.C. Planning Consultants, Inc. and Planimetrics, LLP. 1999. For a free copy of the summary, contact [nconnors@growsmartri.com](mailto:nconnors@growsmartri.com) or call Ned at 401-273-5711. For the full report there is a \$6 mailing charge. Make check payable to GrowSmart Rhode Island, 345 South Main Street, Providence, RI 02903.

Arendt, R.G. Growing Greener: Putting Conservation into Local Codes. Natural Lands Trust. 1997. <http://www.natlands.org/planning/growgreen.html>

Hutchinson, M.F. Aquidneck Island: A Decade of Change: An Analysis of Development on Aquidneck Island from 1985 to 1997. 1998. Contact Rhode Island Sea Grant. Order P1499.

Johnston, R.J. Aquidneck Island and Open Space: An Economic Perspective. 1997. Contact Rhode Island Sea Grant. Order P1461.

Johnston, R.J. Fiscal Impact of a Subdivision on Perry Farm: The Tax Benefits of Open Space Preservation vs. Residential Development. 1998. Contact Rhode Island Sea Grant. Order P1500.

Bartish, T. and A. Desbonnet. Growth Management in Washington County: A Five-part Article Series from The Providence Journal. 2000. Contact Rhode Island Sea Grant. Order P1604.

Projo.com Digital extra on Census 2000: <http://projo.com/news/census/>