

The energy-saving cities

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Can Rhode Island automobile drivers survive on one and one-half gallons of gasoline a day? This is the target set by the federal government for the next quarter in its attempt to make us less dependent on foreign sources of petroleum.

The 7.6 percent reduction of gasoline use over the next three months is a voluntary goal established by the Department of Energy, but should the need arise, the President can mandate this reduction.

Although Rhode Island drivers have done well cutting gasoline consumption in the past, this planned reduced use will place heavy burdens on the average motorist for the auto is the dominant mode of travel here. There is one car registered for approximately every two persons in the state, and the principal use of that car is the drive to work which accounts for 35 percent of all trips and 80 percent of the state's fuel consumption. Additionally, 13 percent of all auto trips are for shopping purposes.

To get drivers' reactions to the 10 gallon-per-week target, one of the local television stations interviewed four motorists from Warwick. In every case the response was extremely negative and each driver said it would be impossible, based on his current driving habits, to meet this goal. In Warwick this is not surprising.

Typical of many post-war expansion areas, Warwick grew too much, too fast, and too spread out. Single-family, detached houses sprouted everywhere, initially built on small lots of one-fourth an acre and then, in time, on lots several acres in size. The result is a spread city of individual houses. The last census count found that 86 percent of the 26,000 housing units were in single-family, detached units.

Today there is a new set of rules or, perhaps more accurately, constraints to this type of suburban sprawl, most important of which is costs of energy, specifically gasoline which fuels not only our cars but also inflation. Imported oil cost this country \$3 billion in 1970, \$27 billion in 1975, and this year will be \$90 billion. Discouraging as are these costs, the real cries of anguish will come when there is a shortage.

To the auto-oriented Warwick community with detached houses scattered over 35 square miles, with retailing at one location (the malls), services at another, and jobs at different location because there is no city center in this city of 90,000 residents, the Post Road and Warwick Avenue thoroughfares have become time-consuming and nail-biting experiences. Even more important, this form of scattered housing and

development cannot sustain a public transit system because of the sprawl and the car, of necessity, becomes the major means of movement.

Given the problems of this type of scattered development, the question needs to be raised as to why it is allowed to continue and why communities in Rhode Island zone a use of the land which is wasteful of energy and destined to exacerbate a problem that will be a part of our life style, i.e., energy costs and supply.

Recent hearings in Washington before a congressional sub-committee on the city addressed this very same question under the title of "Compact Cities: A Neglected Way of Conserving Energy." The thrust of testimony by expert witnesses dealt with the more efficient use of land by concentrating development. Methods to accomplish this included: 1. building on vacant lots in the city; 2. infilling large sections of vacant land in the suburbs bypassed by developers who used cheaper outlying land; 3. building at higher densities to allow more houses to the acre; 4. taxing land rather than improvements to encourage development and discourage land speculation; and 5. placing greater controls on development.

The latter point was addressed by Tom McCall, former governor of Oregon, who provided the leadership to pass in 1973 "the most advanced land use management act on the books anywhere in the United States." According to this legislation, the land is divided into three categories: Urban — existing built up areas; Urbanizable — land surrounding urban land needed for urban use, and able to be provided with services; and Rural — land with no public services and not needed for urban use. By establishing urban growth boundaries scattered development is discouraged and compact development is encouraged, public transit is fostered, and community costs are reduced by using existing infrastructure.

Right now a land management bill with similar objectives of encouraging compact and energy efficient development languishes in the General Assembly. Not as powerful as the Oregon act, it is, at least, a step in the right direction.

A state land management program together with energy conscious controlled development by local communities will do much to prevent more Warwick-style development from taking place. Until the General Assembly provides the leadership by passing the land management bill and local communities use alternatives to sprawled housing development, the unfortunate housing consumer will continue to pay excessively high prices for his housing and fuel and be continually frustrated by archaic zoning inappropriate for today's energy concerned world.

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