

# The cities and towns look ahead

## Chester Smolski

**W**HAT do you want your community to be?

Over the next two and one-half years all communities in the state will be required to address this question, and to come up with a formal statement of what these goals and objectives are to be. And it's about time.

The ongoing burst of development fever that is everywhere evident throughout the state, is causing cities and towns to look at themselves in a manner that too few did in the past. Sleepy towns, declining cities and slow-growing suburbs are discovering that land is suddenly valuable and somebody wants to put houses on it.

In addition to this surge of speculative construction, residents are also finding that they and their children can no longer afford to buy the housing being built within their own communities. All of this appears to have happened almost overnight and most communities are not prepared for it.

This should not have come as a surprise because the state has traditionally grown at a rate below that of the nation. Also, being in the Snowbelt, it was just a few years ago that we were told that we were on our last legs. The future was far from promising.

It should not be a surprise, then, that most towns had no active planning departments and were doing little viewing into the future nor planning for it.

Rhode Island Statewide Planning, now the Division of Planning in the Department of Administration, was aware of the prob-

lem and for over a decade promoted legislation that would, at the state level, address land development issues that were having an impact on cities and towns. This proposed legislation for land management was close to passing on two occasions, but never quite made it. The last 135-page document was, as some legislators said, too lengthy, too cumbersome and too little read to get the whole hearted support of the Senate.

But the problems did not go away and, in fact, become exacerbated, so last year a legislative commission on land use was appointed that drew from the entire community: developers, realtors, environmentalists, bureaucrats, legislators, academicians and others. The legislation developed by that ably led commission was passed 3-to-1 by the House of Representatives and 5-to-1 by the Senate. It became law last June 15, 1988, without the governor's signature.

This far-sighted and necessary Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act requires that every one of the 39 cities and towns in the state must have completed a comprehensive assessment and plan for the future of that community by December 31, 1990. (This deadline was extended by six months from the original legislation to allow adequate time

for all communities to complete their plans.)

With grants ranging from \$44,737 for New Shoreham to \$125,000 for Providence, Cranston and Warwick, but averaging \$75,000 for all communities, every city and town will have available resources to consider the future and to state what that future should hold for that community.

All citizens should be aware of the process taking place in their respective communities and by the end of 1990 every citizen, in his own way, should make himself heard.

The challenge to determine the future of one's own community is at hand. And rather than expressing the negative view of what should not be built, the common practice today, here is the opportunity to say what should be built, and where.

Determining what you want your community to be requires hard work, imagination, understanding for the needs of others, some help from professionals and a positive view of the future. Time will tell how successful each community is in attempting to reach this goal.

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