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URBAN DEEDS/Chester Smolski

# Cooperating for economic development

**T**his small state has an advantage over larger states because its size allows it to share ideas more easily. With only 39 cities and towns, and no county governments, it is possible to have a meeting in Providence, attended by representatives of these communities within less than a one-hour drive.

Even when compared to other small states, Rhode Island can easily sit members of all its cities and towns around a large table for discussion. Why this is not done on a more-frequent basis remain a mystery to me.

So it was refreshing when a meeting of economic development planners was called recently to hear the presidents of Narragansett Electric and Blackstone Valley Electric discuss the energy needs of the state. The 20 planners—not all towns have professionals—were able to share a large table with the two presidents and have a good dialogue.

There is little doubt that the need for communities and the state to cooperate in generating jobs is never greater, and the small size of our state and the small number of cities and

towns make it possible.

But it is not that simple.

In a recent poll of 120 cities in the nation, the problem cited most often was the need for an increased tax base. This is exactly what the local economic development planners cited for their communities as well.

The attitude of many planners is that the leadership of the state Department of Economic Development has changed.

Formerly it was headed by professionals who had a wealth of experience, often in other states. These leaders were able to take the long view, and develop goals and strategies that could bear long-term results. Then, local communities could tie into these plans and feel part of the total picture.

When the leadership of the department comes from the political sector, goals are short-term, in order to show success for the state political leadership. There is less incentive for local communities to associate with these short-term goals, which often result in efforts that benefit some parts of the state at the expense of

others.

The Blackstone Valley region, for example, feels that in order to get jobs and an increased tax base, it has to go out on its own. To illustrate this thinking, one has to look at the recent successful efforts on the part of the mayor of Providence to attract American Power Conversion to the city. That act saved the company for the state and substantially boosted the city's tax base. But was this just a local effort, and should attracting businesses be just a local effort? Or should the state be in a position to coordinate efforts to retain such companies?

The state and its agencies which deal with economic development should take the lead to convince communities that all will benefit with new jobs that increase the tax base. And the state must demonstrate that all communities will benefit from these efforts. Cooperation—not competition—is the way to go.

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