

Where are we going? TV show seeks answers

How will the future Rhode Island look, and will it be better than today? Where will new development take place? How will this development affect cities and towns? Will there be adequate and affordable housing, and where will it be built? Will there be enough land available for future growth, as well as water, sewers, roads and other infrastructure to accommodate this additional population? And will communities try to prevent growth or work to accommodate it? The future is in our hands, and how we address such issues will determine how well our children will live in the not too distant future.

These are the kinds of questions that planners ask and have to address. But planners need the help of the public for, after all, it is the public that should determine what is best for its own community; establish goals to get there; consider what resources are available to reach these goals; decide what methods and processes are necessary to attain them; and, ultimately, work for the improvement of the environment and the quality of life. No small task, but without a vision, it will not happen.

That is the purpose of the TV Town Meeting being sponsored by the University of Rhode Island Feinstein College of Continuing Education and the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program (RISPP), in cooperation with Grow Smart RI, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and corporate partners in a discus-

sion program to be aired on Cox Cable, Channel 3, from 7 to 8 p.m., on Monday, February 28.

RISPP produced a document in 1989 entitled Land Use 2010: State Land Use Policies and Plan in which it provided guidelines for the future development of the state. Subsequent reports in 1998, Land Use Trends in Rhode Island, 1961-1988. In 1999, An Analysis of Rhode Island Land Use, examined trends over time that documented some findings of the 1989 Plan and raised questions about future development. For, as that last report stated, "A full understanding of our development patterns is vital to promoting long-range plans that preserve Rhode Island's environment, economy and quality of life."

The findings of the two latter reports indicate the problems related to the limited amount of land we have in this smallest state and the way in which it is being used.

From 1970 to 1990 our state population increased by 54,000 or 5.7 percent while at the national level the country increased by 22.3 percent during that same 20 year period, a rate of growth four times that of the state.

Yet, during the 18-year period from 1970 to 1988, both years in which the state made a detailed study of the use of land in the state, the amount of developed land increased from approximately 143,000 acres to 200,000 acres, an increase of 40 percent. During this time, the public became increasingly aware of the problem called urban sprawl.

The problem was especially acute in residential use of land, usually the largest user of land, which increased by 45 percent, from 89,000 acres in 1970 to 129,000 acres in 1988, representing 19 percent of total state land area compared with 13 percent of total land in 1970.

Increasing affluence explains such residential land use. To illustrate: in the early 1950s a typical unfinished second floor Cape Cod house, with 672 square feet of living area on the ground floor, set on a 10,000 square foot lot (less than a quarter acre) housed a family with two or three children and sold for \$11,000. Today, a young couple with one child that I know, just moved into their 2,800 square foot house set on three acres which sold for \$250,000. Perhaps not typical of all young couples, but illustrative of the bigger houses, set on larger lots and for smaller families.

So, a simple question: Should we continue to encourage three acre house lot developments that gobble up our limited land, increase infrastructure costs, cause increased traffic and pollution or should we require building at greater densities with smaller house lots, have more sidewalks and bicycle paths rather than roads and save resultant open space for future generations? Simple question but a matter of lifestyle and better quality of life for everyone, not just for those in a position to afford it.

RISPP, over this next year, will conduct a series of meetings throughout the state to gather public input in order to incorporate these suggestions, ideas and possible courses of action into an update of the 1989 State Land Use Policies and Plan. The live TV telecast of Cox Cable 3 will come from the Paff Auditorium at the URI Providence Campus on 80 Washington Street and will be the first of several such opportunities for the public to be heard.

The public is invited to attend the session, or certainly to watch it on television, on February 28 from 7 to 8 PM. "Growth Challenges for the New Millennium - Balancing the Options" promises to be a lively and worthwhile discussion that will have considerable bearing on the future of the state and its residents. Join the crowd and make a difference.

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Commentary

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