

7

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This mini-state needs the land-use plan

Viewpoint

By Chester E. Smolski

The most significant bill to come before this session of the General Assembly will be introduced soon by Governor Noel. The proposed bill to establish a state-local land management program merits the close scrutiny of all citizens of this state. Not only would this program have an immediate effect on Rhode Island, but the full impact of this farsighted bill would fall on succeeding generations.

The 123-page draft text may discourage many, including legislators, from reading carefully the bill's provisions, yet, because

of the changes proposed, our legislators should be fully aware of the bill's implications.

The proposed bill represents a six-months effort by the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program to implement the findings and recommendations of the State Land Use Policies and Plan — a guide to future development of this state. In order to receive citizen suggestions for the bill, a series of public hearings is being held before submission of the final draft to the Assembly.

The 258-page State Land Use Policies and Plan is a series of guidelines and recommendations put together by the Statewide Planning Program over the past seven years. This carefully documented plan attempts to provide direction and order for the future growth and develop-

ment in Rhode Island. It received final approval of the State Planning Council in June of 1975.

It seems inconceivable that this mini-state, smaller than the average size county in this country, should have 39 cities and towns that have authority to decide development issues affecting their own jurisdictions, and adjoining communities and states. Does it make sense for a town to locate a shopping mall on its border with no consideration of the traffic which will be generated in the nearby communities? If Connecticut communities place major industrial developments along Route 95 next to Rhode Island, as has been proposed, what will the impact be on communities of southwestern Rhode Island?

The need is for cooperation rather than

competition among the localities, and among neighboring states. But we must crawl before we can walk, so let us address ourselves only to local and state issues, as the state plan does.

As the draft bill states, "The purpose of the land management bill is to place in one act all of the state enabling legislation for development control (zoning, subdivision, and others), and to strengthen local development control with state standards and procedures aimed at sound land management."

It is the imposition of state standards and procedures that will cause most concern at the local level. There must be greater cooperation between local and state authorities if uniform standards for development are to function.

Given the strong tradition of local autonomy in Rhode Island, local authorities may feel threatened at what they consider the loss of sovereignty. Yet, the sooner we learn that polluted wells in Cranston, ugly strip development in North Providence, and sprawled and poorly planned housing developments in Coventry reflect on all of us, the sooner more orderly development will come throughout the state.

It is to be hoped that legislators can put aside their differences and think as Rhode Islanders the order that the land management bill be implemented as proposed, on January 1, 1977.

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