

Statewide land use plan for R. I.

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The Rhode Island section of the American Institute of Planners has called it "the most significant single item of legislation in the history of land planning in this state," and yet there is the real possibility that this far reaching measure may not be introduced for enactment in this session of the General Assembly.

The proposed Rhode Island Land Management Bill represents a two-year effort by the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program, working closely with Rhode Island planners and using citizen guidance, to bring to fruition the means by which there can be coordinated state and local efforts to provide for orderly land development in this state.

A land management bill was first proposed to the General Assembly in 1976 with the backing of former Governor Noel. It died in committee. Given the responsibility of revising that earlier effort, a Governor's Land Use Task Force was to have its report ready by March 15 for submission to the legislature. The question of state and local responsibility regarding development and designated critical areas, among others in the revision, has proved to be controversial. The Task Force has, therefore, scheduled a meeting with Governor Garrahy on March 22 to determine if the proposed bill should be reviewed another year before it is introduced for enactment. This would be most unfortunate, should it happen, because Rhode Island needs a land management program now.

It is difficult to conceive how a state the size of an average county in this country can be divided into 39 jurisdictions which too often appear to be going off in that many different directions, all because of local control. It is now time that we change this tunnel-vision attitude, and that we look to a larger area to ascertain how the jig-saw pieces fit together, so that state and local authorities may jointly work for a better environment.

Since ours is a city-state, we might well examine and learn from comparable areas which have had great success with cooperation between local authorities and a single, larger authority. Toronto has been called "one of the best run and most vibrant cities in North America." This is so because the city of Toronto, 24 years ago, combined with 12 surrounding cities and towns to tackle common problems. With a population more than twice that of Rhode Island, Metro Toronto's biggest problem at present is trying to ensure enough housing for the middle class who want to be in the city, so they are replacing parking lots with middle income housing — so different from the American city with its penchant for more parking lots and the flight of the middle class from the city.

Perhaps the best example for Rhode Island to consider is to be found in Minnesota. In a region three times the size of this state, the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area is managed by a Metropolitan Council which determines how development will take place over the entire seven county region. Recognizing that problems of pollution, waste disposal, water supply and transportation are no respectors of town boundaries, the recently enacted Metropolitan Land Planning Act, the most sweeping legislation of its kind in the country, is designed to integrate local plans and development into the broader framework of that region.

It is no surprise that such legislation was state-imposed on reluctant local authorities too jealous and afraid to relinquish their prerogatives and powers.

For local Rhode Island officials who fear state-imposed regulations, it is necessary to remind them that the Rhode Island Land Management Bill works to achieve state cooperation rather than state imposition, and the role of the appeals board is to ensure that cooperation.

Consider, also, that selected state and regional efforts are already operating in Rhode Island. The uniform state building code, to go into effect on July 1, 1977, stipulates, for example, that a certain type pipe for plumbing installations will be uniformly acceptable for each of the 39 cities and towns rather than having 39 different requirements, as was the case in the past.

On the regional level, three northern Rhode Island communities together with one in Massachusetts have discovered that they can be far more successful in attracting jobs and industry to their area through cooperation rather than through competition, and for this reason have established an economic development organization. Another organization will join Portsmouth, Middletown and Newport in a similar regional effort.

Local control has been a long tradition in Rhode Island but the needs of today's society dictate that local authorities must work with larger authorities for solutions to problems which transcend town boundaries and abilities: the Land Management Bill provides the means to accomplish this. And it is to be questioned as to how much more revision of the proposed legislation is necessary to please local authorities, a goal virtually impossible to achieve.

It is hoped that the revised Rhode Island Land Management Bill will be introduced and passed in this session of the General Assembly. The benefits of being in the forefront of regional planning and management will accrue not only to us but also to our children.

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