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Land use — the Senate buckled under the test

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They killed it on May 4, 1978. Quietly, behind closed doors and out of the public eye, this small, powerful group decided that the Senate of the Rhode Island General Assembly would not pass Bill 77-H 6299 (Substitute "A"), An Act Establishing a State-Local Land Management Program.

The Senate Majority Leader, on emerging from the Senate Democratic Caucus meeting, is quoted as saying "they all agreed" that the Senate should not pass the bill. As a result of this "democratic" action, the State of Rhode Island lost an opportunity to have some effective control over the use and development of its limited and dwindling supply of land.

Was the bill really that important? The governor thought so and declared its lack of passage to be his biggest legislative disappointment. The 74 percent of the representatives of the General Assembly who voted for its enactment must be disappointed. The Governor's Land Use Task Force and the General Assembly Joint Commission on the Environment who, between them, held more than 50 public meetings to get public and legislative response to the concepts of the bill must be disappointed.

Two years ago, the Statewide Planning Program, which drafted the original measure, brought it to the General Assembly. After considerable citizen discussion and input, Planning redrafted the measure and brought it back to the General Assembly last year. It went through the whole process again this year to satisfy citizens, agencies, special interest groups, cities and towns; the resulting 136-page end product by this time had been greatly altered from the original in order to meet objections raised. After all the time, effort, money, and man-hours spent on the project, they too must have been disappointed. And although they do not realize it now, our next generation of Rhode Islanders who will have to live with the botched up and haphazard land development that will

continue to characterize this state, will also be disappointed.

Not everyone will be disappointed. Those utilities, contractors, and municipalities who got their money's worth from their paid help, who lobbied hard to convince senators to keep the bill off of the Senate floor, should be satisfied. So should the investor in rural land who will still be able to get a fast return on the buck — after all, he now can maintain his individual liberty to do this, and not be part of this socialist utopian plan which would have us live together in communal projects (his words). The Senate Majority Leader who said, "I have absolutely no idea what it does" — he had only read summaries of it — should likewise be satisfied.

Thus the status quo will continue.

It is disillusioning and disheartening to see how a far-sighted and innovative piece of proposed legislation met its end.

It is unfortunate also that the Senate group could not see this bill as an attempt to bring new industry to this state, and with it new jobs. Good industry looks with favor on those states that have some plan of action in the use of their resources and which seek to upgrade these resources. In a recent survey done in Connecticut, it was the quality of the environment that was the principal basis for industry moving to that state. This is what the Land Management Bill was meant to do — not by usurping power away from the local municipalities, but by establishing a cooperative and joint effort between local and state governments to work for the betterment of the entire state.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the loss of this bill is what lies ahead. It will be difficult, if not impossible, in the near future to resurrect this bill and go through the whole process one more time. Money, time, and effort by Statewide Planning may have to be directed to other pressing needs within the state.

When they killed the Land Management Bill this year, it is quite likely that they killed it for a long enough time that this generation will not see nor appreciate nor realize the benefits to be gained for Rhode Island by effectively planning our future.

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