

# Missed opportunity in S. Kingstown

## Chester Smolski

They were well dressed, although informally. They came with their spouses. They were articulate, educated, and generally did not raise their voices. They looked like solid middle-class Americans — homemakers, civic-minded, and concerned citizens, so it was difficult to believe and understand their reaction to the proposed housing development.

At the public hearing in early October this group of about 100 abutting land owners came to hear about a proposal that would cluster 360 townhouses on 217 acres in East Matunuck in such a way that more than 80 percent of the site would remain as farmland and open space. Audience reaction ranged from a proposal to institute a five-acre minimum house lot size in order to "maintain the character of the town" to the assertion of the woman who stood up and said the proposed development should be rejected "to protect our children." It sounded as though the Visigoths were about to invade South Kingstown or, worse, that the proposal was really a low-income project for minorities.

Only one person — a long-time resident and long-term planning board member — spoke in favor of the proposal. And he was the only one who spoke in terms of "what is good for the town."

The message from the meeting clearly got through and two weeks later the Town Council, in a 4-to-1 vote, turned the proposal down. Referring to "transients" who would occupy these houses and "elitist housing" that did not protect the family unit and was not appropriate to the town, and ex-

pressing a reluctance to provide a zoning variance for multiunits, the council lost an opportunity to provide a model development that was ecologically sound and environmentally safe for this fragile coastal zone.

Spokesmen for the Department of Environmental Management and the Coastal Resources Management Council were greatly upset by the rejection of the proposal for they saw this development as a paradigm for the state. The local developer and award-winning design and planning consultant, also a town resident, working closely with these and other governmental agencies and a team of consultants, had put this proposal together over an 18-month period. The proposal was innovative in water and sewerage construction, exciting in terms of architecture, well designed in terms of planning, and sensitive to environmental opportunities and constraints. Additionally, it was fiscally sound for the town, with an anticipated annual tax gain of \$650,000 rather than a deficit of \$328,000 if single-family units were constructed, for which the site is currently zoned.

The variance sought was for a reduced house lot size to one-half acre to allow for townhouse construction and the use of a waste water reuse system, rather than sewers, that could result in a 55 percent reduction of water use. This proposed system is not unique.

A recent editorial in these papers cited several examples of such waste water reuse. Clayton County, Georgia is spraying semi-treated waste water on a 3,500-acre pine forest, as are communities in Maine, Michigan, and Texas where such water is used on future Christmas trees, corn fields, and cotton fields. At Pennsylvania State University treated sewage effluent is

sprayed onto forests and croplands with two results: hay yields increased by 30 percent and effluent was filtered as it moved down through the soil.

In the case of the proposed development, recovery wells would be used to draw partially filtered waste water from the ground to be used for irrigation purposes, i.e., watering lawns and available cropland. The whole system is predicated on clustering houses to allow for a common septic tank from which the waste water can be utilized, something not possible with single-family detached housing.

The advantages of this proposed development were many: houses priced from \$80,000 to \$120,000 in a shore community with access to the water, developed as part of a comprehensive plan that provided available farmland, open space, and recreational facilities; using solar energy, saving water, reducing potential ground water pollution, and treating the environment with respect; and, finally, providing a financial, social, and aesthetic asset to the town. All of this at no cost to the town because the developer had proposed covering all costs of construction and maintenance of the development.

It will be another year before this proposal again reaches the Town Council, should the developer choose to resubmit it. The council, which took no heed of its own Planning Board which strongly recommended the development, should carefully weigh the evidence at that future date. If they decide to reject the proposal, they should have the right reasons. This time they turned it down, but for the wrong reasons.

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