

# Helping communities determine development

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

The word uppermost in the minds of many communities these days is "development," a process that manifests itself on the land in the form of the built environment. Alarmed at the speed with which land is being used—and often abused—communities are being faced with tough decisions on how to cope with development, either by directing it, managing it or even stopping it.

This is a far cry from just five short years ago, when unemployment rates in Rhode Island exceeded 11 percent and residents were more than happy to have almost any development take place to generate jobs and increase the tax base. Today, with jobs going begging and demand for land at a high point, the question of an increased tax base is a moot one, as more cities and towns consider the impact of development on the quality of life within their confines.

"Development Issues in Rhode Island" was the theme of a recent meeting held at Rhode Island College, where 75 professionals from diverse fields came to better define the problems and to suggest solutions. The suggestions elicited from the meeting will be passed on to the soon-to-be appointed land-use commission, a body created at the last

meeting of the General Assembly under sponsorship of Rep. Robert Weygand (D-East Providence). The purpose of the land-use commission is to recommend policies on zoning, land regulations and housing, among others, in order to bring about a more coherent and comprehensive pattern of land development in the state.

The nine sponsors of the meeting, headed by the American Planning Association of Rhode Island, ranged from the Rhode Island Builders to Save the Bay and from the League of Women Voters to four colleges and universities in the area. In addition to hosting speakers, the all-day program consisted of eight workshops, but the two that drew the greatest response were affordable housing and development.

## Affordable housing

Affordable housing is now a major problem throughout the Northeast and especially in the Providence metropolitan area, now listed as the eighth-most-expensive housing market in the country, with average prices exceeding \$130,000 at the end of June. Given such prices, affordable housing is no longer just a concern for low-income persons but also for the many middle-income families, some with multiple earners, who still cannot find housing to meet their needs.

Developers are not happy with the situation, either, and they attribute some increased housing costs to bureaucracy: state and local regulations that are ambiguous; the lack of local professional staff members to interpret these regulations and to work with developers to ensure proper development; time lag—approvals from the Department of Environmental Management that take more than one year and planning boards that meet on a monthly basis and often postpone decisions (many boards in Massachusetts meet on a weekly basis); and, finally, zoning.

According to a recent Rhode Island Statewide Planning report on housing and residential land, multi-family units to meet the needs of renters are not allowed in four of Rhode Island's 31 towns, and 17 allow them only through the special-exception process given by the zoning board of review.

## Lot size

Large lot size is also a major constraint to affordable housing, because land cost in Rhode Island in 1981 stood at 29.2 percent of the cost of a house, while the national average was only 23 percent. Right now, according to the report, more than 56 percent of the residential land in the state is zoned for two or more acres per house lot.

The planner from North Kingstown said it well by noting that our zoning laws are archaic and allow for no in-

novation such as cluster development, PUD (planned unit development) or zero-lot line, many of which would help reduce the cost of housing.

The task of providing affordable housing for low-income persons is a formidable one, because the federal government has cut its housing support from \$33 billion in 1981 to the less than \$10 billion last year. Further, as members of the recently-appointed Governor's Housing Unit stated, as Section 8 mortgages run out or are prepaid, another group of low-income persons, many of whom are elderly, will be thrown out into the volatile private-housing market and will worsen the problem.

Housing is only one aspect of development, so the major problem for a developer coming into a community for any type of development is lack of vision on the part of the local community as to what it wants for itself. The frustration of the developer is that he is told what not to do rather than what he can do. Communities need to determine what they want for the future, and here, planning is the key.

The land-use commission will be working with suggestions gathered from this meeting and from others, but their difficult and necessary task will likely take over a year to accomplish. Their work for better use of the land in Rhode Island will be closely watched. □

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