

# Herculean task ahead for R.I. land-study panel

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**Chester Smolski** 12/14/81

**I**T has an impressive title — Commission to Study the Entire Area of Land Use, Preservation, Development and Regulation. Selection of the 23 committee members was made by top governing and legislative officials — governor, lieutenant governor, Senate majority leader and House speaker. It has a budget of \$50,000 and is supposed to submit recommendations to the General Assembly by Feb. 25 — a virtual impossibility.

This special legislative study commission was approved by the General Assembly in the latest session, after a resolution was introduced by Rep. Robert Weygand of East Providence, who has been appointed panel chairman.

Given the enormity of the task and the shortness of time in which to address issues vital to the future growth and development of Rhode Island, it would be better if the commission concentrates on comprehensiveness rather than doing a rush job to meet too short a deadline. Development pressures throughout the state warrant a reasoned and balanced approach that can produce sound recommendations for action by the General Assembly.

Development now taking place within the state rivals that of the post-World War II era, when thousands of returning servicemen were

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faced with a desperate need for housing. Finding none in the cities, they looked to the suburbs, where land was available for development. Government mortgages and, in time, fast roads made possible the suburban boom that, by 1970, found most people living in the suburbs rather than the central cities.

Warwick illustrates what this post-war development meant to a community that was seventh largest in the state before the war. Growth rates of 50 percent in the late 1940s, 59 percent in the 1950s and 22 percent in the 1960s nearly tripled the population of 1940, and now this city ranks as second largest in the state, at more than 87,000.

But Warwick became the symbol of how not to develop. Communities, even now, shun "Warwick-style development." Yet communities today are still making the same mistakes. Narragansett, fastest-growing community in the past two decades, has failed to accommodate its growth successfully and is repeating the errors of a generation ago.

Traffic is the issue of the 1980s, and the results show in the growth of our cities and towns. Reservoir Avenue was an early example of the auto-oriented strip that was built to catch the eye of the driver speeding by, but it is now superseded by a

Mineral Spring Avenue that illustrates how not to accommodate the auto. The disaster at the intersection of Routes 5 and 6 in the center of Johnston is too late to rectify, and the new commercial activity at the intersection of Routes 5 and 44 in Smithfield will soon be another Johnston and, even now, may be too late to change. Is this the legacy we will leave our children?

The hot issue right now is affordable housing, and the commission will also be considering this thorny problem. At the end of September, the Providence metropolitan area experienced the highest percentage increase in housing cost of all the 53 metropolitan areas in the nation surveyed by the National Association of Realtors — a whopping 37.8 percent over the past year, bringing the median price of an existing house to \$126,600.

Traffic and housing are directly related to land use, a major charge to the commission. Recommendations regarding controls to increase efficiency of traffic flow and slow down escalating house prices may well lie in the manner in which houses are sited. Higher-density housing could reduce prices and make public transport more efficient by serving groups of people. Scattered dwellings and people make for less efficient, more costly public transport.

However, local communities do not see it this way. Not only do about one-third of our communities lack fulltime planners; not only do half of them have obsolete comprehensive plans for future development, but they too often seek to expand minimum lot sizes (last year, North Smithfield increased such sizes from  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  acres for one house lot).

The commission will likely look at zoning issues, incentives to increase housing for low-income dwellers and a variety of other measures to address other numerous problems within their charge. But the single biggest issue will likely be the question of local versus some type of state control or management over the use of land.

If a community is unwilling or unable to provide services (currently quality of education is one of these), does the state have the right and obligation to make them available? Should the state mandate, for example, that towns update comprehensive plans every five years? That cluster development be required? That multi-family housing be available?

This legislative commission has a major responsibility to recommend measures to provide for the orderly development of Rhode Island. It is a task that bears close watching, whether the commission meets its February deadline or not, for the future is too important to be left to chance.

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Chester E. Smolski is director of urban studies at Rhode Island College.