

# Retaining the charm of Rhode Island

The town of Exeter in Washington County is an unusual place - it is classed as one of the few remaining rural communities in the state. With 86 percent of Rhode Island considered urban by the Census Bureau, rural designation is something special in this second most densely settled state in the union.

It is this rural feature of the town that appeals to persons living there and who move to the town because of its open and natural character. But it looks like the town may be going the way of so many other communities in the state, with holders of large blocks of land selling out to highest bidders rather than thinking about the land which provided them a living as part of our heritage that should be passed on to succeeding generations.

Located on the border of Exeter and North Kingstown, the 150 acre Bald Hill Nursery is seeking a zone change so that the 135-acre portion in Exeter can be developed. A shopping center, one-half the size of the Warwick Mall, together with a 16 screen cinema and parking for 4,000 cars, would replace the nursery. If that happens, that may well be the end of another rural community in the state.

Although Exeter has experienced rapid population growth in the past, recording a 23 percent increase from 1980 to 1990, the number of residents projected for the year 2000 is just 5,859, only 400 more and just a 7 percent increase over that of 1990. But these numbers would jump considerably with such a large commercial development, a development which would help spawn new housing and other commercial activities surrounding it. For an example of this, look at Route 2 in Warwick with its two malls and the strip development along this major thoroughfare which results from its close proximity to the malls.

It would be a wonderful community gesture if Leonard

Savella, current owner of the property, were to make arrangements to retain the rural character of the property but that seems highly unlikely. Mr. Savella put it succinctly, "If they want open space, all they have to do is pay me the \$5 million the developer will pay me."

Since we do not have a system in this state, as they do in Oregon and in England and other European countries which discourages farmers from selling off their land and becoming instant millionaires, it looks like Exeter and the state will continue to lose more of their remaining open pristine land. Can nothing be done to prevent this loss that all Rhode Islanders will feel?

In England they surround their cities with "Green Belt," i.e., land on which development is prohibited. The area surrounding London, twice the size of Rhode Island, is a green belt in which 69 percent of the land is in farms. Farmers wanting to sell can do so but only if the land continues to remain as farms.

In Oregon they surround their cities with "Urban Growth Boundaries" beyond which any development is discouraged. The net effort is much the same as in England, with lush green fields, forests and farms the common type of scenery rather than the typical American view of ugly signs and strips of commercial activities that make every landscape look the same.

Can anything be done in this state to save our land for posterity, rather than making it an ugly replica of so many other parts of the country? This was one of the questions recently addressed in a meeting of approximately 100 local Rhode Island planners.

Although the 40 land use plans for each community and one Indian Property in the state address local issues, there is no state mandate that regulates such matters. Although state planners have made recommendations to concentrate development in existing urban centers and preserve open and rural areas, there are no current means to encourage this form of development.

But there is a movement under way to make Rhode Islanders aware of the problem, consider alternative types of development and work to manage subsequent growth.

"Grow Smart Rhode Island" seeks to bring diverse interest groups together to address

questions of quality of life, economic vitality and environmental health. They hope to do this by "promoting business and residential growth in urban and town centers and advancing open-land conservation and the preservation of rural character."

Representatives of Grow Smart spoke to the planners and offered views of their concern.

The loss of 26,000 acres to development over the past 10 years, even though there has been no increase in population, illustrates the problem resulting from people leaving built-up areas, now in decline, for rural areas which are becoming more urbanized and experiencing problems of inadequate school and infrastructure facilities.

Ours is a charming state, still with sizable areas of rural land that provide opportunities to get close to nature, but unless measures are adopted to retain that land in its present state, the rural charm will disappear in time, both for us and for our children. Grow Smart and similar efforts are a step in the right direction. □

*Chester E. Smolski,  
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