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# Imagination brought to earth

## Chester Smolski

**T**HERE'S an old saying, widely attributed to Will Rogers, that says, "Buy land because they're not making it anymore." And as developers search for fewer available and more expensive buildable sites all over the state, most would agree with the saying.

With the average buildable house lot in Rhode Island now exceeding \$66,000, the prospective homeowner is faced with a building cost approximately twice that of the land here in the state; thus the problem of affordable housing.

The costs of land for commercial development are considerably higher, depending upon the location, site conditions, and presence of buildings. Recent land costs in the state, according to a local business paper, approach \$780,000 an acre on Route 2 near the Warwick Malls; reach \$3.27 million an acre on the Newport waterfront; and are most expensive in downtown Providence at the Capital Center, where sale prices have reached up to \$4.8 million an acre. In fact, some land at the Capital Center is not available for sale and will only be used on a leasehold basis.

Given the astronomical prices for limited land at the Capital Center and, as Brian Jones has perceptively written in these papers, the decision to relocate a TV station, university center and bus station, is there not some way to increase the amount of land available in this high-demand area?

It has been suggested that the city investigate the possibility of building a parking lot over Route 95 as a way to provide extra parking for the downtown, but a subsequent analysis apparently discounted the idea.

Perhaps the city is not dreaming big enough.

Consider some recent examples where building over, under and adjacent to highways has proven

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### *Providence needs to go back to the drawing board, and reconsider its air rights*

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to be possible: Kanawha Plaza, a two-acre park over a highway in Richmond, Va; city hall in Fall River, over Route 195; Prudential Center and Copley Place in Boston, over the Massachusetts Turnpike; two apartment towers over the east approach to the Washington Bridge in New York City; and in downtown Sacramento, Calif., the unique Sutter Square Galleria, an 80,000 square feet retail center built beneath, and on both sides of an elevated highway.

The leader in building in highway air is Seattle, Wash: An eight-acre Freeway Park, complete with waterfall to cut highway noise and a 600-car parking garage, was built in the 1970s; a new convention center built on a concrete platform over a 12-lane freeway next to Freeway Park just opened; and now, plans for a 39-acre residential development over the highway are in the works.

California "rents" the air over their highways for development and collects \$10.5 million annually. Copley Place in Boston, a complex of hotels, offices, residences, retail mall and parking for 2,000 cars, pays the city for its 100-year lease of the air. And even though building costs are higher in this type of development, the spokesman for Copley Place said, "We ended up with land in the most desirable part of Boston that wouldn't even have existed otherwise."

Building costs for this form of development are higher because of vibration, noise, exhaust and need to keep the highway open. In the case of Copley Place, for example, approximately 5 percent of the total project cost of \$550 million resulted from such construction. But the returns more than compensate for these extra costs: prime location; expansion of downtown; reconnecting neighborhoods that were formerly severed from the downtown; and increased revenue to cities.

The city of Providence needs to go back to the drawing board and consider its highway air rights again. The demand for land is still evident and perhaps more "land" can be constructed in the air as other cities have demonstrated.

For as the spokesman from the lovely and innovative West Coast city stated, "It is lack of imagination, not prudence, that keeps more cities from following Seattle's lead."

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