

Leaders get advice on 'smarter' approach to growth

By Meaghan Wims/Daily News staff,

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Achieving "smart growth" isn't always easy, but communities can reap economic, environmental and quality-of-life benefits if they make the effort.

That's the word from Geoffrey Anderson, director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth Program.

Anderson spoke Tuesday to dozens of local politicians and development officials at a luncheon presented by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

Current development trends are resulting in small-scale, spread-out residential developments, gobbling up farmland and open space and forcing Americans to rely on cars to get everywhere. Traffic jams ensue, and water and air quality and animal habitats suffer. Taxes increase because services and infrastructure must stretch to handle the sprawl.

But smart growth - in general, concentrating residential and commercial properties in central "smart" locations - can improve property values, provide more transportation choices, help the environment, protect open space, increase affordable-housing options and reduce municipal costs, Anderson told the group.

"You can really get some synergies that create some real gains for your community," he said.

Anderson said it's up to local communities to work collaboratively with key players, including planning officials and developers, to create proactive goals for incorporating smart-growth principles into new and re-developed properties.

West Main Road, in Middletown, is a perfect example of how the old theories of commercial zoning - requiring large setbacks and minimal parking - should be ditched for new smart-growth thinking that provides for more pedestrian-friendly, less traffic-intense developments, Anderson said.

"The technical solution is out there if you have the political solution behind it," he said.

Robert W. Gilstein, Portsmouth's town planner, agreed.

"There are ways of doing" smart growth, Gilstein said after the luncheon. "It takes the political will and understanding."

Keith W. Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said Newport County has been pursuing smart-growth initiatives.

Newport is "a smart-growth city," Stokes said. Improvements to Broadway, Thames Street and the city's north end, as well as Portsmouth's Town Center proposal, incorporate smart-growth ideas, he said.

Stokes said communities and business owners must work together on these efforts.

"We can't make these decisions in a vacuum," he said.

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission had received a technical assistance grant from the EPA Smart Growth Program for recommendations on how Aquidneck Island can incorporate aspects of the commission's West Side Master Plan into local ordinances.

The commission is in the early stages of implementing its West Side plan, which examines the future of residential and commercial development, transportation, open space and shoreline access on the 10-mile, 5,000-acre stretch of land that extends through parts of Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth, from the Gateway Center to the Mount Hope Bridge.

The group's executive director, Tina Dolen, said the commission is working on developing cost estimates for a number of its master plan initiatives, including a "blue" kayak trail along Narragansett Bay and a shoreline drive.