

Local officials discuss impact of stimulus

January 30, 2009

By Sean Flynn

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MIDDLETOWN — The state's associate director of planning was the star of an island-wide meeting Thursday night, because he is coordinating the state's effort to line up projects for funding through the federal stimulus package approved this week by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Kevin Flynn, who also heads the State Planning Council, had a copy of the 290-page American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 approved by the House, and was optimistic about what it could mean for the state if the U.S. Senate backs a similar bill. "It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for all of us," he said.

Here's what it would mean for Rhode Islanders, according to Flynn:

The state would receive a little less than \$210 million for public works projects, including \$154.3 million this year for highway projects.

The state would receive more than \$110 million "to prevent tax increases and cutbacks in critical education and other high priority areas." This allocation is called "fiscal stabilization funds."

Another \$96 million has been targeted for school districts, for building and repair projects and for programs to help impoverished and special-needs students.

The act would provide almost \$149 million this fiscal year in extra federal dollars for Medicaid, a health insurance program for the poor that normally requires the state to match the federal contribution.

Flynn was one of the speakers during a Community Leadership Forum co-sponsored by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission and Grow Smart Rhode Island. More than 60 participants, including members of the Newport City Council and Middletown and Portsmouth town councils, planners, planning and zoning board members, city and town administrators and redevelopment agency members attended the forum at the Atlantic Beach Club.

They had plenty of questions for Flynn. Paige Bronk, Newport's director of planning, zoning and development, wanted to know how the federal government defines projects that are "ready to go." The act says projects have to be initiated within 180 days. (The timeline was 120 days before the act was amended in the House.)

Flynn said it is not clear what the federal government means by the requirement, but he does not believe projects with long design phases and permitting processes would qualify.

"The idea is to get people working," he said. "People working in the construction trades have taken the biggest hit."

While the federal government is discussing allocating large amounts of money to the state, Flynn said the figures must be put in perspective. For example, he said, Woonsocket is building two middle schools at a cost of \$80 million and Central Falls has documented \$100 million in repairs

to its schools.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, outlined the formation of an Aquidneck Island Re-Use Planning Authority that officially will form in April with representatives from each of the island communities. The regional redevelopment authority will consider proposals for 384 acres of land that the Navy plans to declare surplus. The planning commission released a West Side Master Plan in 2006 for the development of Navy surplus property.

Dolen outlined a timeline for what will be taking place in the next two years. Once its members are appointed, the authority will receive notices of intent for the properties for 180 days, or about six months, until November. The authority would then have to put together a redevelopment plan for the properties between December of this year and August 2010. The Department of Defense's Office of Economic Adjustment and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development would review the plan in September and October of 2010.

Once the plan is completed and the property disbursed, the Re-Use Planning Authority would be disbanded.

Dolen said relatively large parcels could be "transformed" in a relatively short period of time after they are sold.

"It's really an exciting process," she said.

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