

AQUIDNECK ISLAND
LAND CONSERVATION STRATEGY:

PROGRESS REPORT AND INITIAL ACTION PLAN

2000



AQUIDNECK ISLAND PARTNERSHIP

One Shared Vision For One Island Community

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COASTAL RESOURCES CENTER
University of Rhode Island

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Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy

Progress Report and Initial Action Plan

2000

A project of the
AQUIDNECK ISLAND PARTNERSHIP

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This work would not have been possible without the cooperation of members of the Aquidneck Island Partnership.

The **Aquidneck Island Partnership** is a collaborative effort of local organizations committed to fostering economic development that enhances the natural and social resources of the island. The partnership's goal is to identify islanders' common interests and to implement activities that protect the island's unique character and quality of life.

Members of the partnership: Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, Town of Portsmouth, Town of Middletown, City of Newport, Aquidneck Island Land Trust, Center for Community Character, Dunn Foundation, Newport County Chamber of Commerce, Foundation for Newport, Green Light Foundation, Norman Bird Sanctuary, East Bay Economic Initiative, Eastern Rhode Island Conservation District, Naval Station Newport, Newport County Board of Realtors, Sierra Club/ Rhode Island Chapter, Preservation Society of Newport County, Coastal Resources Center, University of Rhode Island

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Although these groups and individuals were critical to the completion of this document, all errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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About the Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy

The future of Aquidneck Island—the quality of its neighborhoods, businesses, schools, and landscapes—is a gift to the children of the island. The *Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy* describes actions that islanders are taking to conserve special places on the island, making the island a better place for future generations.

The *Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy* is also a call to action, describing what people living and working on the island must do to maintain active farms, protect water supplies, conserve natural habitat areas, link open spaces, and encourage transportation alternatives. Working together, islanders can achieve their shared island vision and leave Aquidneck Island in good shape for the future.

Introduction

The landscape of Aquidneck Island is changing rapidly. Between 1985 and 1997 over 1,400 acres of land were converted to major residential subdivisions. Build-out scenarios predict that if development continues at current rates, the island could be entirely developed, with all available land used by commercial and residential development by 2025. In Portsmouth and Middletown, most of the new development is occurring on once-productive farmland and in critical habitat areas.

The ongoing development of Aquidneck Island is already impacting islanders' quality of life. Traffic is increasing. Transportation data and predictive models show that daily average traffic across the Sakonnet Bridge has increased by about 15 percent during the last decade (1990 to 2000). Daily trips have increased from 25,936 trips in 1990 to 29,753 trips in 2000. A similar increase has been seen across the Pell Bridge, with trips predicted to increase from 17,700 in 1990 to 20,457 in 2000.

The Aquidneck Island Partnership (AIP), a consortium of public and private interests committed to fostering economic development that enhances the natural and social resources of the island, is concerned about the island's future. Starting in 1997, the partnership has worked closely with islanders to understand and document people's vision for the future of Aquidneck Island. The vision that has emerged is wide ranging, incorporating social, economic, and environmental goals. The land conservation strategy primarily focuses on the environmental aspects of the vision. Other AIP initiatives are underway to address the social and economic goals.

The land conservation strategy began in the winter of 1999 with a series of workshops with participation from both state and local interests. The workshops were designed to engage a broad spectrum of people interested in land conservation to develop and implement strategies for conserving key areas of the island.

The over 60 workshop participants were divided into subcommittees to focus on land conservation for five significant island issues:

- ❖ **Safe, Sustainable, Drinking Water Supply**
- ❖ **Linked Open Space**
- ❖ **Protected Habitats**
- ❖ **Active Farmland**
- ❖ **Alternative Modes of Transportation**

Each subcommittee developed a goal statement and an initial action strategy. The subcommittees then met regularly throughout the spring and summer of 1999 to research, refine, and implement their strategies. This report presents the strategies, accomplishments, and call to action of each subcommittee. Each section also contains a description of how the committee actions are achieving the future vision for Aquidneck Island.

This report reflects the hard work and dedication of islanders, municipal leaders, and state government representatives working together. The accomplishments represent the unified work of new partners sharing a common vision for Aquidneck Island.

While development of the strategy took time and effort, the work that lies ahead is even more daunting. Full implementation of the *Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy* will require the combined efforts of individuals and organizations living and working on Aquidneck Island.

Safe, Sustainable, Drinking Water

Goal: Provide Aquidneck Island with a protected, safe, sustainable, high-quality drinking water supply.

Call to Action:

- **Educate the public about their drinking water supply.** Many islanders do not know where their drinking water comes from. Explore and test creative ways to enhance islanders' understanding of the current status of their water supply and future threats to this supply.
- **Remediate existing water quality problems.** Work with landowners and towns to install and maintain buffer areas along all streams and tributaries in the water supply watersheds, because stream buffers filter runoff, removing some pollutants before the water reaches the stream and the water supply reservoir. Encourage the Rhode Island Department of Transportation and towns to install stormwater management structures to treat polluted runoff from developed areas.
- **Encourage state and local agencies to develop initiatives and policies that promote water quality enhancement and protection.** The committee will continue to work closely with island municipalities and with the Rhode Island Department of Health on water quality projects such as the source water assessment program (SWAP) scheduled to begin in the spring of 2000.
- **Incorporate water supply protection recommendations in town comprehensive plans.** The committee will coordinate research and outreach activities with the three towns through the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

Progress to date:

- Developed conservation recommendations for critical watershed properties within the watershed areas that supply Aquidneck Island. The watershed areas surrounding the island reservoirs and the recommended conservation areas are shown on the following pages.
- Wrote and partially implemented a watershed signage plan. Signs will be posted on major island roads at watershed boundaries and at stream crossings to enhance the islanders' awareness of the water supply.

Want to help?

Contact Roy Anderson, Newport Water Department chief, at (401) 846-9600.

Safe Drinking Water and Our Island Vision

Most of Aquidneck Island's drinking water comes from a small network of streams and reservoirs maintained by the Newport Water Department (NWD). The system's nine surface water reservoirs are located in Little Compton (Watson Reservoir), Tiverton (Nonquit Pond), and on Aquidneck Island (Lawton Valley Reservoir, St. Mary's Pond, Sisson Pond, Nelson Pond, Gardiner Pond, and North and South Easton reservoirs). This system supplies water to the entire population of Newport. The NWD supplies water to 70 percent of Middletown's population, with the remaining 30 percent relying on private or community wells. Sixty-seven percent of Portsmouth receives water from the NWD (under contract with the Portsmouth Water & Fire District), with the remainder of the water supply coming from private wells.

A safe, sustainable, water supply is essential to the future of Aquidneck Island and is key to achieving the island vision.

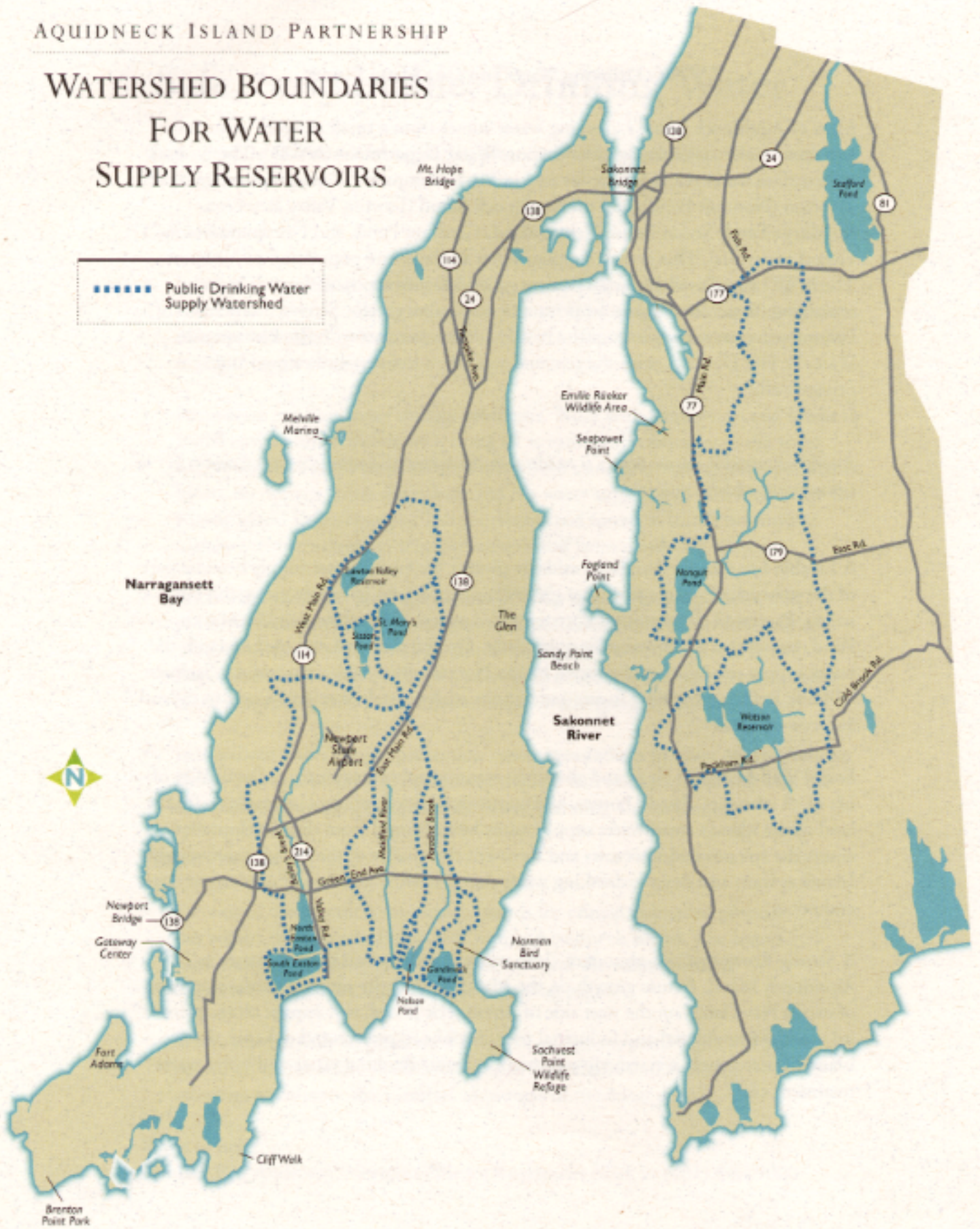
A Livable Landscape: Lands set aside to protect the island water supply become part of the network of open spaces that give Aquidneck Island its scenic views and landscapes. Preserved lands around Portsmouth's Lawton Valley Reservoir, St. Mary's Pond, and Sisson Pond maintain open vistas. On the southern end of the island, the water supply reservoirs are bounded by the Norman Bird Sanctuary and the Sachuest Wildlife Refuge, providing future generations with coastal views and access to upland and coastal areas.

Social Well-being: A clean and abundant water supply contributes to the quality of life of all islanders. Roads, homes, and commercial developments increasingly fill the land of the island's small water supply watersheds. Runoff from this development enters the streams and reservoirs and threatens the quality of the island water supply. Islanders want and deserve drinking water that is healthy and free of unpleasant tastes and odors.

A Strong Economy: An abundant clean water supply can attract businesses to Aquidneck Island. Future growth on the island, such as the proposed redevelopment of excess Navy lands on the west side of Aquidneck Island, will require clean, plentiful water for residential and industrial uses. Actions to protect and enhance the island's water supply watersheds will result in better drinking water and lower water treatment costs.

WATERSHED BOUNDARIES FOR WATER SUPPLY RESERVOIRS

Public Drinking Water
Supply Watershed



Linked Open Spaces

Goal: Link open spaces so people may walk or bike safely from one end of the island to the other.

Call to Action:

- **Educate the public on the location and uses of open space.** Create a booklet or brochure on island parks and open space and include information on the cultural and historical significance of each area. Provide information on parking, fees, handicap accessibility, etc. for each place.
- **Create an islandwide greenway system.** The system will link existing open space, protect critical resources, and provide opportunities for recreation, and land for agriculture and for wildlife habitat. See map and description on the following pages.
- **Work with municipalities and developers to apply creative development techniques.** Techniques will be selected that support creation of greenway systems.
- **Identify and promote funding strategies.** Funding is needed to support the preservation and linkage of open space.
- **Incorporate open space recommendations in town comprehensive plans.** The committee will coordinate research and outreach activities with the three towns through the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

Progress to date:

- Planned a trail from one end of the island to the other. The trail will connect urban Newport with the suburban and rural areas to the north. The trail will allow the public to access recreational open spaces without using cars. The proposed trail system links all major paths throughout the island and winds through scenic vistas, watershed areas, farmland, and urban areas.
- Identified priority areas for conservation or easement needed to create the trail system.

Want to help?

Contact the Aquidneck Island Land Trust at (401) 849-2799.

Linked Open Space and Our Island Vision

Aquidneck Island has beautiful scenic ocean views, wide open spaces, farmland, and recreation areas. Yet islanders are concerned that if development continues at its current pace, the remaining open space will be fragmented, limiting public access, interrupting wildlife corridors, and eliminating beautiful landscapes.

Linking open spaces is essential to the future of Aquidneck Island and is key to achieving the island vision.

A Livable Landscape: Linked open spaces connect the island's urban areas with its more rural areas. When islanders can safely traverse the length of the island, they will be able to enjoy more easily the island's fields and open spaces. Linked open spaces will also provide residents with easy access to recreation areas where they can fly kites, roller skate, walk, and play softball. Preserved landscapes also save special historic places for future generations.

Social Well-being: Parks and other open spaces that are connected and easily accessible to pedestrians and bikers will contribute to the quality of life of all islanders. Linked open spaces will allow children from urban neighborhoods to bicycle safely to parks and playing fields, often located in neighboring communities. Children from suburban and rural areas will be able to safely walk or ride to neighborhood schools and libraries. Adventurous athletes will be able to travel from Portsmouth to Newport without use of a car or bus.

A Strong Economy: Linking open spaces contributes to the island's economic viability. In many communities, open spaces increase property values. Undeveloped lands do not need costly municipal services. Open space makes the area more attractive to visitors, bringing money into the community. Communities with recreation and open space are also attractive to business executives and their families, and can lure businesses to the area.

Alternative Modes of Transportation: Linked open space trails and greenways are nontraditional means of transportation, providing islanders with opportunities to travel safely around the island without relying on automobiles. Bicycle and walking trails and horse-riding paths can be extended to connect to recreational fields, beaches, and shopping areas, providing residents with transportation alternatives.

A Proposed Trail System for Aquidneck Island

The following linked open space trail system will allow individuals to walk, ride, or bike from one end of the island to the other. The map on the next page illustrates the locations of the trail. Portions of this trail exist. Some areas have not been fully developed.

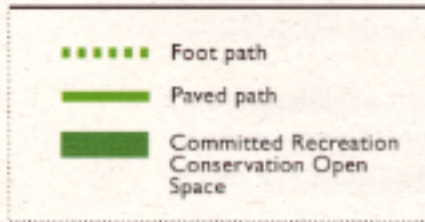
North

Imagine -

- ❖ *The Old Colony Railroad line extending south from Common Fence Point to Burma Road. There is a walking path alongside the railway in conjunction with a bike path.*
- ❖ *Several access points to the shore that branch off from the railway line, including Boyd's Marsh, Willow Lane, Cory's Lane, and Melville, which are developed as small parks.*
- ❖ *A route linking the hiking trails at Melville Campground with access to the Bay and the Melville pond system and connected with the current bike path along Burma Road.*
- ❖ *Public access through the ravine located at the east end of Weaver's Cove and just north of Carr's Point that connects to the open space areas surrounding the Lawton Valley Reservoir.*
- ❖ *An open space trail that extends from the Lawton Valley Reservoir around Sisson's Pond and St. Mary's Pond through the St. Mary's Church Property to tie into the Glen and the Sakonnet Greenway.*
- ❖ *A pedestrian traffic light at Sandy Point that allows individuals to proceed south through the Sakonnet Greenway to the Norman Bird Sanctuary.*
- ❖ *Public access through St. George's School, proceeding along Purgatory Road and through the shore of Easton's Beach to Cliff Walk in Newport.*
- ❖ *A route from Cliff Walk through the Ballard and Rogers High School properties via Ruggles Avenue, concluding at Fort Adams.*

South

PROPOSED LINKING OF OPEN SPACE



Protecting Natural Habitats

Goal: Maintain the island's ecological diversity by protecting critical habitats.

Call to Action:

- **Educate the public.** Emphasize the importance of healthy wildlife and the need for protected habitat areas to support wildlife populations. Create programs targeted at owners of large tracts of land to raise awareness of habitat issues.
- **Encourage landowners to develop and implement land management plans.** Actions will be directed at conserving natural resource areas on private property.
- **Develop criteria for classifying special habitats.** Identify parcels with special habitats.
- **Conserve contiguous land parcels.** Attempt to form large undeveloped corridors of habitat.
- **Identify and conserve properties and buffer areas.** Consider areas that have the potential to protect critical habitat areas.
- **Incorporate habitat protection recommendations in town comprehensive plans.** The committee will coordinate research and outreach activities with the three towns through the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

Progress to date:

- Identified properties where model land management plans can be developed. Many of Aquidneck Island's wildlife habitat areas are found on private lands.

Want to help?

Contact Betsy Deleris, Norman Bird Sanctuary executive director, at (401) 846-2577.

Protected Habitat and Our Island Vision

Aquidneck Island supports populations of birds and other important wildlife. Much of the habitat for this wildlife is found on private lands.

Protected habitats are essential to the future of Aquidneck Island and are key to achieving the island vision.

A Livable Landscape: Healthy, natural, habitat areas needed to support plentiful and diverse wildlife populations are an integral part of the island landscape. Areas such as the Norman Bird Sanctuary and Sachuest Point have provided generations of islanders with opportunities for recreation and reflection. They provide the additional benefit of maintaining healthy wildlife populations.

Animal populations provide information on the health of the natural environment. For example, the types and numbers of aquatic organisms in island water supply reservoirs and streams are indicators of water quality.

A Strong Economy: Wetlands and other coastal habitats provide nursery areas for fish and shellfish and indirectly support the island's tourism economy. Undeveloped coastal areas preserved for habitat protection also provide tourists with scenic vistas and access to coastal environments.

Alternative Modes of Transportation: Maintenance of corridors of land for wildlife habitat can often be linked with greenways and the development of bike and walking paths.

Protected Farmland

Goal: Maintain active farmland, which makes a significant contribution to the local economy and conserves the agricultural landscape.

Call to Action:

- **Establish an islandwide Agricultural Advisory Committee.** The committee will work to enhance communication between farmers, community leaders, and local and state organizations.
- **Create educational programs.** The programs will promote consumption of locally grown products and show students and residents how to get more involved in the island's agricultural community.
- **Demonstrate new and emerging agricultural ideas, technologies, and practices.** Innovative agricultural techniques may help keep agriculture viable on Aquidneck Island.
- **Preserve prime agricultural lands.** Preserve these lands so that Aquidneck Island can maintain active agriculture.
- **Partner with state agencies and utilize Rhode Island's farmland protection programs.** These programs will help farmers achieve their farmland conservation goals.
- **Incorporate farmland protection recommendations in town comprehensive plans.** The committee will coordinate research and outreach activities with the three towns through the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

Progress to date:

- Developed and marketed a promotional brochure of island farms and farm stands so islanders can easily locate where to buy local produce.
- Surveyed farmers to determine the course of action that islanders must take to support viable farms.
- Promoted the conservation of agriculture through educational displays describing the benefits of farmland to the community.

Want to help?

Contact the Aquidneck Island Land Trust at (401) 848-2799.

Protected Farms and Our Island Vision

Farmland is part of the natural and cultural heritage of the island. Protecting active and productive farms, and encouraging islanders to support these farms by buying locally grown produce, preserves some of the essence of the island's past.

Protected farmland is essential to the future of Aquidneck Island and is key to achieving the island vision.

Livable Landscape: Preserving farmland is central to maintaining Aquidneck Island's landscape. Although development pressures in Middletown and Portsmouth make it increasingly difficult to maintain active farms, Aquidneck Island is well suited for productive agriculture. Active farms maintain the rural New England character central to the history of the island. Properly maintained farms preserve environmental quality by protecting soil and water resources. Farmland open spaces also provide essential links in the remaining wildlife corridors on the island.

Social Well-being: Farms contribute to the quality of life of island residents by providing islanders with reminders of their cultural heritage. Active farms provide islanders with places to pick strawberries, to buy fresh produce, to tag Christmas trees, or to browse the growers' market.

A Strong Economy: Agriculture contributes to the local and regional economy by creating jobs, generating sales, and supplying secondary markets. While residential development puts demands on schools, infrastructure, and other municipal services, farms generate more in local tax revenues than they cost in services. Additionally, tourists attracted to the island because of the farms, vineyards, and scenic vistas contribute to the local economy.

Alternative Modes of Transportation

Goal: Develop an integrated transportation system for Aquidneck Island—one that reduces the negative impacts of auto use on air quality, congestion, growth patterns, water quality, and public safety; promotes easy-to-use, cost-effective, alternatives to automobile travel.

Call to Action:

- **Make transit to, from, and within the island accessible and convenient.** Link schedules, create pedestrian-friendly districts, and advocate for funding for island transit. Promote installation of sidewalks, trails, bikeways, and paths. Encourage connections between transportation modes.
- **Promote safety.** Ensure that public safety becomes a top priority in planning and design of transportation systems.
- **Maintain the island airport.** Ensure the viability of Newport State Airport and to promote transit options to and from the airport.
- **Incorporate alternative transportation in town comprehensive plans.** Ensure that each community's comprehensive plan incorporates a viable and coordinated transportation plan and land-use policy that encourages the use of alternative modes of transportation.

Progress to date:

- Mapped bus routes, rail lines, ferry docks, and recommended bike routes with the major nodes of activity on the island to identify where gaps exist in alternative transportation services (see map, page 18). The map clearly illustrates the need for expanded bus and trolley service.
- Hosted a demonstration for local representatives to show how intermodal transportation can be used to ease traffic congestion on the island.
- Encouraged installation of a natural gas fueling facility at RIPTA's Middletown garage for use by mass transit vehicles.

Want to help?

Contact John Tucker, of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, at (401) 846-5684.

Transportation and Our Island Vision

Transportation is one of the four cornerstones of the vision for the future of Aquidneck Island. Because the island lacks safe bikeways, frequent and convenient local bus service, trolleys, and commuter trains, islanders are forced to rely on automobiles. The resulting traffic congestion, air pollution, and parking problems will continue until islanders are given viable transportation alternatives.

Alternative modes of transportation are essential to the future of Aquidneck Island and are key to achieving the island vision.

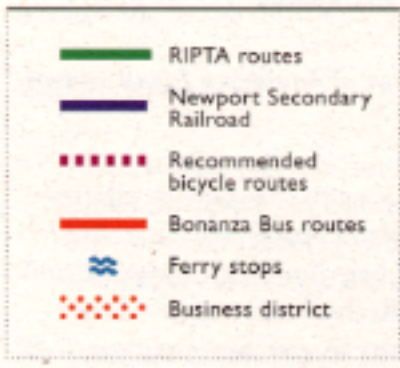
Livable Landscape: Implementation of transportation systems that provide alternatives to the automobile will help maintain Aquidneck Island's rural landscape. Alternative mass transit—trolleys, buses, and light rail—will help limit highway expansion on Aquidneck Island, helping to maintain open space. Recreational transit—bike paths and greenway trails—gives islanders the opportunity to exercise, commute, and enjoy island landscapes.

Social Well-being: Alternative transportation systems are needed to maintain the quality of life on the island. Bike paths and riding trails bring neighborhoods together. They promote healthy lifestyles by providing opportunities for exercise. They also provide opportunities for recreation and fun—key components of community well-being.

A Strong Economy: The economic future of Aquidneck Island depends on efficient transportation, both on the island and between the island and neighboring cities. The daily traffic jams during commuting hours may deter new industry from locating on the island. Efficient and inexpensive transportation off-island is needed to support existing industry and future economic growth. Efficient transportation is also needed to support the island's tourism industry.

AQUIDNECK ISLAND PARTNERSHIP

EXISTING TRANSPORTATION
CORRIDORS



Next Steps

Over the next several years, the AIP land conservation committees will continue to move forward with updating and implementing these plans.

There are immediate opportunities to link the land conservation initiatives with two major AIP projects currently underway:

- Providing assistance to Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth as they revise their municipal comprehensive plans and zoning and subdivision regulations. The AIP is coordinating with the three towns on regional policies for transportation and natural resources.
- Participating in the West Side Master Plan initiative. The U.S. Navy is investigating options for the excessing of over 400 acres west of Route 114. The AIP sees this as a major opportunity for determining future employment, transportation, public access, mixed-use development, and open space protection along the east passage of Narragansett Bay.

The *Aquidneck Island Land Conservation Strategy* challenges everyone—state and local government, businesses, and citizens young and old—to take action. It is only through working together that islanders can implement their shared vision for the island.

Everyone is welcome to join the effort at any time. To get involved, please contact:

Aquidneck Island Partnership
Coastal Resources Center/Rhode Island Sea Grant
University of Rhode Island
220 South Ferry Road, Narragansett, RI 02882
(401) 874-6224
<http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu/riseagrant>

“Properly conducted preservation programs that attempt to protect aquifers, agricultural lands, wetlands, scenic vistas, natural areas, historic properties, and open spaces may have a positive effect on our environment. However, we believe that growth should also be encouraged since it stimulates the economy, increases the tax base, and provides places to live and work. We also realize the responsibility we have to educate and work with local, state, and federal governments and local environmental groups to develop responsible growth planning that is equitable, while considering the needs of transportation, residential, agricultural, commercial, and environmental concerns.”

Helen Sternberg-Powidzki
Newport County Board of Realtors

Appendix

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAND CONSERVATION

R.I. Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) Natural Recreational Trails Development Grants: Funding will be provided to communities interested in developing hiking and bicycling trails. For more information contact: RIDEM at (401) 222-2776.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) New England Smart Growth Challenge Grant Program: To aid communities and support the development and application of new tools and approaches for preventing sprawl and encouraging in-fill and redevelopment. For more information contact: EPA at (617) 918-1087.

EPA State Grant: EPA will provide Rhode Island with non-point source grants to help communities tackle growth management issues. For more information contact: EPA at (617) 918-1087.

Oil Spill Restoration: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was awarded funding to restore natural habitats and expand refuge areas. For more information contact: State Planning at (401) 222-6479, or RIDEM at (401) 222-4700.

Real Estate Conveyance Tax: Portsmouth and Middletown have allocated a portion of the funds acquired from the real estate conveyance tax to acquisition of critical open space. For more information contact: Local municipalities.

State of Rhode Island \$15 million bond measure: Dedicated to the creation of bikeways and greenways and the protection of open space to be spent over the next three years. For more information contact: RIDEM at (401) 222-2776.

TEA-21: A federal program that creates tools for using transportation to revitalize communities and create alternatives to driving. Funding will be spent to build new highways; for interstate maintenance; for transportation enhancements including bicycle and pedestrian projects; for transit and rail projects; and for highway system repairs. For more information contact: Sierra Club/Rhode Island Chapter at (401) 521-4734.

USFWS Small Grants Program: USFWS will fund small projects for habitat protection of waterfowl. For more information contact: RIDEM at (401) 222-2776.

NEW SOURCES OF FUNDING

Block grants to towns: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development annually provides funding to the state. Funding must benefit low and moderate income neighborhoods. For more information contact: State Planning at (401) 222-6479.

Governor's \$50 million open space bond: If approved in November 2000, \$5 million yearly for 10 years will be spent on state and local land acquisition, local recreation development, and future state park development. For more information contact: RIDEM at (401) 222-4700.

Legislative grants: The state legislature allocates funding to support specific initiatives. For more information contact: State representatives.

Municipal budgets: Citizens could lobby to allocate a certain amount of local funding to land preservation. For more information contact: Local municipalities.

The Nature Conservancy and Audubon Society of Rhode Island (ASRI): Aquidneck Islanders could lobby The Nature Conservancy and ASRI to preserve habitat and open space that meets their criteria. For more information contact: The Nature Conservancy at (401) 331-7110, or ASRI at (401) 949-5454.

USFWS Refuge Acquisition: This federal initiative may provide funding for the preservation of critical habitats adjacent to existing refuges and protected areas. For more information contact: RIDEM at (401) 222-4700.

Notes

