

Artist colony is smart use of farmland

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The broad concepts of "smart growth" - concentrating residential and commercial properties in central "smart" locations while preserving open spaces - were discussed this week at a meeting sponsored by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

It isn't always easy - and requires political will - but smart growth can mean economic, environmental and quality-of-life benefits for the communities that make the effort.

Geoffrey Anderson, director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth Program, told local officials and planners that such planning can improve property values, provide more transportation choices, help the environment, protect open space, increase affordable-housing options and reduce municipal costs.

Although it may best be illustrated on Aquidneck Island, the impact of residential and commercial growth is being felt across Newport County. Planning and zoning boards from Jamestown to Tiverton are grappling with the pressure to increase the tax base and provide affordable housing while at the same time preserving the rural nature of their towns, and some of the wide-open spaces that characterize them.

A proposal in Tiverton could be a wonderful example of how this could work.

Joseph Bossom and his wife, Mika Seeger, would like to turn their 173-acre farm on Cornell Road into an artists community.

The complex would feature 50 affordable farmhouse-type cottages, along with artist studios. About half of the land, or some 90 acres, would be dedicated to agriculture and farmed by those who would be part of a cooperative the artists would buy into. An additional 20 homes would be built and sold at market rate.

The plan - which Bossom said was inspired by a public-television program about the lack of affordable residential space for artists - has garnered support from Church Community Housing Corp. and interest from the state Department of Environmental Management.

The idea to incorporate agriculture into an artists community came from the Rhode Island School of Design, which studied the proposal under the auspices of the Rhode Island Foundation.

The community not only would grow and process - and possibly sell - some of its own food, but there also is enough wind power to generate some of the electricity it would use. Bossom said a hayfield on his farm is the highest point in the town at 250 feet above sea level, and would be a good location for a wind turbine.

Preliminary plans have been presented to the Planning Board and permit applications are expected this spring or summer, with construction as early as next spring.

Bossom, who turned down a developer's offer of \$3 million for his property, said he doesn't want to see the farmland developed into what he calls a typical subdivision - rows of cookie-cutter houses with separate driveways.

"Everyone has a car, no one talks to each other and all the houses look alike," he said of modern-day subdivisions. "We want something better."

It sounds like they are well on their way.

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