this election season, be smart

2018 Briefing Book for Candidates & Voters
A biennial publication by Grow Smart RI
Introduction: A Letter from Scott Wolf

We are pleased to provide you with the 2018 edition of Grow Smart RI’s biennial Briefing Book for Candidates and Voters.

In the two years since our last briefing book publication, we are pleased to note that Rhode Island has experienced several positive developments. Our economy is stronger, cranes are once again on the downtown skyline, our quality of place and local food scene are the subject of numerous magazine articles, and new companies are choosing our state as a place to locate and grow their industries.

As Grow Smart RI celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, we and our allies in the public, private, and non-profit sector can take justifiable pride in these positive developments, along with some credit for them. Initiatives and investments that we have championed over the years are gaining traction, moving our communities forward, and changing the face of Rhode Island for the better.

But we believe that Rhode Island still has serious remaining challenges and vast untapped potential. Additional efforts are needed to maintain our urban-rural balance, further energize our Downtowns and Main Streets, upgrade our transit system, expand our supply of attainable housing, and curb the loss of our forests to renewable energy sprawl.

Growth is not smart if it only benefits the few, so it is critical that we work to improve access to jobs, transit, and housing for all Rhode Islanders, while preserving the outstanding natural assets and local character of our state. Providence has made impressive gains in recent years but this revitalization momentum has not fully translated to many other municipalities. We must accelerate and expand our statewide revitalization momentum by cooperating with, rather than competing against, each other to make prudent, targeted investments in our infrastructure and neighborhoods.

We at Grow Smart RI are confident that we can build upon the successes Rhode Island has made and achieve additional policy reform if we continue to encourage communication, expand opportunities for collaboration, and further develop public-private partnerships. We feel strongly that we must identify, protect, and invest in our statewide assets at the same time as we recognize and address our liabilities.

In publishing this document, our 9th Briefing Book, we are highlighting how our efforts can produce continued economic and quality of life improvements. We focus on four broad policy areas where we believe government, alongside its private and non-profit partners, should work to expand economic, environmental, and social opportunities. We highlight projects and partnerships that are already working to move Rhode Island forward, as well as policies that have the potential to do the same. We hope that candidates at the federal, state, and local level can use this Briefing Book to help construct their positions and that voters will find our recommendations helpful when evaluating candidates.

Any questions or requests for additional information that you may have are welcomed. We look forward to working with you and all Rhode Islanders to promote policies that accelerate and expand our emerging comeback while preserving the magical soul of our state.

Scott Wolf
Executive Director, Grow Smart RI
Convening a broad coalition to improve quality of life for all Rhode Islanders.

20 YEARS OF SMART GROWTH

In 1997, six organizations came together concerned that suburban sprawl and urban disinvestment were endangering Rhode Island’s economy and quality of life. As they evaluated existing conditions, one thing became clear – the state needed to think and act more strategically about future growth. There was broad agreement that Rhode Island required a focused effort to examine the impacts of haphazard development and to consider alternatives for sustainable and equitable growth.

Grow Smart RI was born out of this statewide consensus in 1998, when Jim Dodge, then Chairman and CEO of the Providence Gas Company, brought together a broad coalition of business and civic leaders committed to making a positive difference in the quality of life and economic well being of all Rhode Islanders. We were founded on the idea that progress is made not through polarized dialogue and tribalism but through consistent, coalition-based efforts in support of policies that play to our strengths.

Fast forwarding to 2018, changing demographics, greater interest in urban living, and increasing concerns about public health have made smart growth approaches to development increasingly popular and profitable. More people, including private sector leaders, are realizing the economic and marketing advantages of smart growth priorities, including walkable neighborhoods and preservation of natural resources.

But we at Grow Smart RI are not just responding to these recent trends. We have been advocating for smart, asset-based growth for the past twenty years: seeking to capitalize on the competitive advantage offered by our historic buildings and neighborhoods, strategic geographic location, compact development patterns, and exceptional natural resources. We’ve also offered training programs and technical assistance for a significant part of this period to support municipalities in preserving their urban-rural balance, expanding their supply of housing that is affordable, and making their neighborhoods more transit- and pedestrian-friendly. Rhode Island has developed tools and incentives over the past twenty years that have drawn several billion dollars in private investment back to our cities and town centers, and we’ve been there to help make it happen.

As progress towards a more economically and environmentally sustainable Rhode Island continues, Grow Smart RI will redouble its efforts to provide vision, best practices, and thought leadership for this essential effort. We plan to build upon the solid foundation and positive momentum we have established over the past twenty years to keep advocating for smart economic growth with staying power.

With your continued support and collaboration, we can prove that Rhode Island’s best days are still ahead.
OUR COMMITMENT

Grow Smart RI provides statewide leadership for diverse public and private interests seeking sustainable and equitable economic growth. We promote such growth by advocating for compact development in revitalized urban, town, and village centers balanced with responsible stewardship of our region’s natural assets - farmland, forests, the coastline, and the Bay. We inform leaders, decision makers, and concerned citizens about the many benefits of compact development and asset stewardship and provide research and training on proven smart growth strategies. We convene broad coalitions that advocate policy reforms and specific projects designed to build communities where all people and businesses can thrive.
SMART GROWTH EXAMPLES AROUND THE COUNTRY

We’re not alone in the smart growth movement. States, cities, and towns all over the country are responding to changing market forces and taking advantage of the benefits of compact, user-friendly development that enlivens communities and improves our quality of life. With the examples below, all sides point to smart growth.

**Williamson, West Virginia**
Action plan around local food and health marked by a new health and wellness center for former mining neighborhood residents without access to healthcare plus downtown farmers markets and community gardens

**State of Vermont**
Growth plan offers funding preference to programs that maintain historic settlement patterns of compact downtown centers separated by rural farms and forest; focuses resources on designated growth centers

**Iowa City, Iowa**
Revitalized riverfront district after flooding with an emphasis on resilience; transformed neighborhood into a compact, mixed-used development district and restored diverted waterways for more recreational green space

**Atlantic Station, Georgia**
Multi-use development on a former brownfield – with diverse transportation options, emphasis on walkability, and emissions reduction

**Lowell, Massachusetts**
Conversion of a former textile mill into a business, artistic, and housing center through the reuse of historic buildings or revising zoning practices to ensure sustainable development

**Columbus, Ohio**
Incorporation of green infrastructure to improve water quality, increase neighborhood park spaces, and encourage walking and biking
Make note of the latest trends that smart growth policies can push forward.

88% of people who live in highly-walkable places also report that they are more satisfied with their quality of life.

*National Association of Realtors, 2017 Nat’l Community and Transportation Preferences Survey*

The three most important factors to recent home buyers in 2018 are quality of neighborhood (58%), convenience to job (42%), and overall home affordability (39%).

*National Association of Realtors, 2018 Home Buyers and Sellers Trends*

Between 2006 and 2016, the proportion of people biking to work nationwide increased by approximately 25%.

*Smart Growth America, Best Complete Streets Initiatives of 2017*
ECONOMIC GROWTH WITH STAYING POWER

Let’s recognize and capitalize on our statewide assets.

Together, we can accelerate the trajectory of Rhode Island’s economic comeback.
Providence has long been an economic engine for Rhode Island, representing over 50% of the state’s GDP but only 18% of the state’s population. It often acts as a leading indicator for Rhode Island of economic progress being made and challenges to be addressed. Yet we encourage you to think of Providence not only as an economic engine but a revitalization engine – driving the movement toward a more sustainable and equitable Rhode Island. Accelerated improvements to infrastructure and quality of life are not out of reach for other municipalities, but to make sustained statewide progress, we must provide more technical support and targeted, project-specific funding to smaller cities and towns pursuing major revitalization visions. To do this, we must ensure that proven statewide tools for local revitalization such as the State Historic Tax Credit and the State Brownfield Remediation Fund are adequately funded. And even though Providence has been moving forward, it must continue to improve and revitalize, with emphasis on reducing its high number of underutilized storefronts and vacant buildings/lots.

But economic growth means more to us than implementing incentives and business friendly, development-centered policies.

For growth to truly be smart, we must also expand opportunities. Adequate and affordable housing options, access to natural resources, and safe and convenient transit for people of all ages and abilities should be important priorities moving forward.

More development should be compact, improving and taking advantage of existing infrastructure, to ensure that families and wildlife are not displaced, either physically or by cost. These people-focused concerns must be considered alongside traditional development considerations, and they need to be addressed early in the development process, to ensure that growth benefits all Rhode Islanders.

In the pages that follow, you will find state and local policy recommendations on a wide range of topics from community revitalization and public transportation improvements to increased housing opportunities and natural resource preservation. Although they may seem separate, these issues are connected by an overarching theme: recognizing and capitalizing on our statewide assets to produce economic growth with staying power. Our goal is to make Rhode Island a better place to live, work, play, and create for those who call it home and for those who visit. We hope to reinforce the progress Rhode Island has made over the past few years and work to accelerate the trajectory of its economic comeback, while expanding the number of people who benefit from it.

This briefing book represents an important step in that process.
REVITALIZED URBAN & TOWN CENTERS

“Investing in our historic resources is a direct investment in our future.”

Trudy Coxe
Preservation Society of Newport County, Grow Smart RI Board Member
Well designed and planned revitalization projects are a win-win for the entire state: they create jobs, attract new talent and industries, expand Rhode Island-based businesses, repurpose vacant and underutilized infrastructure, increase local tax revenues, and limit sprawl on farms and forests.

Rhode Island is home to a broad range of historic buildings and neighborhoods that are a key foundation of our vibrant urban life and rich cultural traditions. But many of our Main Streets and town centers have been in transition, reminding us of the vibrancy and prosperity we have the potential to reclaim. We believe that it is critical to help our cities and towns take full advantage of recent market preference shifts towards mixed-use, compact, walkable neighborhoods. But for this to happen, our municipalities need the capacity to coordinate and secure investments from multiple public and private sources. They also stand to benefit from incorporating smart growth approaches to development into their planning and zoning reforms, as well as any new development projects.

While investments in revitalization are important to maintaining the historic character and economic viability of our cities and towns, we must also work to avoid displacing Rhode Islanders from their neighborhoods as we accelerate the pace of our revitalization. One potential consequence of rapid redevelopment is a shortage of affordable housing options that are connected to existing resources like retail and transit.

A recent study by Rhode Island Housing and Housing Works RI projects a significant, growing shortage of housing units to meet our current and future statewide demand. This trend is driven by several factors, including a continued reduction in average household size, the first significant population growth spurt Rhode Island has seen in decades, an aging population moving to fixed retirement income, and growing millennial student debt. Available housing, and in particular affordable, multi-family options, must increase dramatically to meet projected need, especially in our urban areas.

But it is important that we maximize the opportunity to accommodate new housing development in efficient, transit-rich walkable neighborhoods instead of expanding construction into farmland, forestland, and open space. Real estate market shifts parallel this idea: people are increasingly drawn towards compact, walkable neighborhoods that offer convenient access to restaurants, amenities, and transit options. Communities must prepare to take advantage of these trends if they want to stay competitive and attract private investment to improve their infrastructure.

New tools such as the recently passed Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program (when funded) and the recently reformed Municipal Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Program can put municipalities in a better position to respond to changing consumer preferences. We must also continue to take advantage of and fine tune existing resources like the Rebuild RI Tax Credit and the Main Street Rhode Island Streetscape Improvement Fund to make further progress. It is additionally important that candidates at the state and local level support legislation to fully recapitalize proven revitalization programs like the State Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program, which has a waiting list of 32 projects that represent a proposed investment of more than a quarter-billion dollars in the Rhode Island economy. Taking full advantage of these effective resources and developing new, creative redevelopment incentives are critical to accelerate and expand our revitalization momentum in future years.
COMMMUNITY REVITALIZATION

Policy Recommendations

STATE

☑ Provide funding of $15-20M annually for the Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program. Take full advantage of this recently passed competitive grant program that targets public investment in specific local infrastructure projects that are critical for economic, housing, and community development.

☑ Fully re-capitalize the State Historic Preservation Tax Credit. Provide multi-year funding for the proven State Historic Tax Credit program that has stimulated the rehabilitation and economic repurposing of hundreds of underutilized or vacant historic buildings across the state.

☑ Establish a statewide Opportunity Zone Fund. Leverage the new federal Opportunity Zones program by creating a fund for private investors to make long-term, private capital investments in attainable housing options and redevelopment through new place-based tax incentives.

☑ Introduce a place-based development assistance program that provides professional staffing and encourages community engagement. Develop a place-based development program in Rhode Island similar to the Transformative Development Initiative (TDI) in Massachusetts that enhances local public-private engagement, improves quality of life for residents, and increases investment in local economic activities.

☑ Include an annual line item in the State Budget in support of affordable housing. A recent study by HousingWorksRI projects up to a 40,000-unit shortage of housing to meet current and future demand by 2025. Available housing, and in particular affordable, multi-family workforce housing, must increase dramatically to meet the projected need and that can’t be met just by zoning reform strategies and occasional bond issues.

LOCAL

☑ Examine the opportunities for community and economic revitalization. Ensure that your city or town’s Municipal Comprehensive Plan is up to date and adequately reflects the opportunities to leverage, optimize, and preserve the community’s assets for this and future generations. Focus on the steps for implementing your Comp Plan. Engage your City or Town Council, members of your Planning Board, residents, and stakeholders.

☑ Look to implement zoning reforms and incentives that attract private investment in walkable, mixed use, people-focused development. Consider relaxing parking, density and setback requirements, as well as utilizing incentives such as tax stabilization for revitalizing mixed-use development districts. Prioritize siting schools and public libraries in your city or town center.

☑ Make use of available tools and resources to revitalize neighborhoods. Take advantage of tools such as the recently reformed municipal tax increment financing (TIF) law to make critical investments in the infrastructure needed to support new private investment where you want it. Advocate for state funding of the recently passed RI Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program.

☑ Make it easier to build more housing in close proximity to jobs, services, and transit. Adopt local zoning reforms to encourage Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU’s), in accordance with recently passed state law that allows single-family homeowners to build these units by right as a tool to address underutilized properties and provide additional affordable housing.
Smart growth policies are designed to revitalize our communities.

**A FEW SMART FACTS**

Nearly 60% of Rhode Island’s population growth since 2000 has occurred within local historic districts, which comprise only 1 percent of the state’s land area.

Source: PlacEconomics (study for Preserve RI & PSNC)

Every dollar the state invests in a tax-credit program generates $10.53 in economic activity.

Source: PlacEconomics (study for Preserve RI & PSNC)

**SMART GROWTH ON THE GROUND**

Westerly Education Center, Westerly

Thanks to extensive public, private, and philanthropic coalition-building, a 2.5-acre brownfield site was converted several years ago into a vibrant downtown hub for job training. It is now contributing to the ongoing revitalization of Downtown Westerly, while providing critical resources to residents and local employers. This center aims to train up to 1,000 Rhode Islanders annually in skilled trades to improve educational opportunities and meet local demand for jobs, a win-win for both urban revitalization and economic growth.
EXPANDED TRANSPORTATION CHOICES
One of the most vital components of a healthy, vibrant economy, and a competitive quality of place is a well-functioning transportation system – one that connects people, businesses, and places with each other and with economic opportunity, whether across town or across the globe.

Among the challenges facing many states today is how to simultaneously reinvest in ailing 1960’s roads and highways while at the same time adapting to the mobility needs of the 21st century. Rhode Island is no exception.

A user-friendly mass transit system is increasingly seen by business and civic leaders around the nation, and here in Rhode Island, as a key competitive advantage to building and sustaining a strong and vibrant economy. It is well-documented that the millennial generation, soon to dominate the workforce, prefers living and working in walkable, bikeable places that are well-served by mass transit. Many leading employers are now relocating to amenity-rich locations in order to compete for or retain young talent.

As the 2nd most urbanized state in the nation, the presence of an effective mass transit system in Rhode Island is achievable – and essential to optimizing the revitalization potential of our many urban and town centers.

In recent years, Rhode Island has made significant advances to improve its transportation system.

- Last year, Rhode Island implemented RhodeWorks, a bold and controversial initiative for raising and investing significant new resources to repair Rhode Island’s crumbling roads and bridges and to make investments in modernizing Rhode Island’s transportation system.

- Leaders at the local level are taking steps to implement “complete streets” policies to make their communities more walkable, bikeable, and safer for people of all ages and abilities.

- Within very tight financial constraints, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) has been introducing modest improvements and new technology to improve the transit experience.

- Rhode Island has also been successful in winning competitive federal TIGER Grants (now called Build Grants) to re-establish commuter rail service in Pawtucket and Central Falls and to build an enhanced transit corridor through the capital city and the hospital district.

- More recently and under the Governor’s leadership, RIPTA kicked off the development of the state’s first-ever comprehensive Transit Master Plan to envision a fully integrated transit system that gets more people where they need to go when they need to get there.

Home values are 42% higher when located near high-frequency public transit.

-American Public Transportation Association

Still, there’s significant work to be done in order to realize the potential of a modern transportation system and to be sure that our investments in transportation contribute to a more competitive, vibrant, and user-friendly Rhode Island.
Transportation

Policy Recommendations

State

✓ Engage in the development of RI’s Transit Master Plan.
   As a statewide leader, take an active role in preparing Rhode Island to shape a transit system that works well for people, business, our cities and towns, and environment.

✓ Collaborate with MA officials to prioritize speed and frequency improvements to BOS-PVD commuter rail.
   TransitMatters, a Boston-based transit advocacy group, has put forth a well-received strategy for improving MBTA commuter rail beginning with the Providence Line. Connect with MA counterparts to make this a regional priority so that RI can begin reaping the economic rewards of easier interstate access.

✓ Leverage growing demand for transit-oriented development (TOD).
   Provide guidance and support to municipalities seeking to align land use and economic development goals with transit infrastructure. Consider opportunities to enhance and expand in-state commuter rail south of Providence.

✓ Create a RIPTA transit pass program for state employees.
   Emulate the popular RIPTA transit pass program for private sector employees (Eco Pass) by providing a similar offer to the 14,500 state employees, as called for in the Rhode Island State Employee Transportation Guide Plan.

   In addition to investing in brownfield clean-up and redevelopment, local recreation, open space, clean water, and coastal resiliency – the $47.3M bond will support a $5M investment to advance completion of Rhode Island’s popular bikeway network across the state.

Local

✓ Provide municipal input to the development of RI’s Transit Master Plan.
   Take advantage of opportunities to shape the new statewide comprehensive Transit Master Plan by highlighting local interests and resource constraints related to multi-modal transit issues like bus routes, bike-share, and pedestrian access.

✓ Partner with RIPTA.
   Optimize local transit service and amenities by partnering with RIPTA to coordinate the physical requirements for improved transit service, safety, and satisfaction. Implement participatory budgeting, a process by which residents suggest and vote upon publicly-funded neighborhood projects, for local transit issues like bike lanes, bus shelters, and traffic calming.

✓ Advance ‘Green and Complete Streets’ at the local level.
   Propose a municipal ‘Green and Complete Streets’ ordinance that ensures due consideration for including natural stormwater and walkable/bikeable design principles into all road repair and reconstruction projects.

✓ Explore opportunities for transit-oriented development.
   Identify local transit corridors, routes, and nodes that lend themselves to transit-oriented development and community revitalization.

✓ Consider offering municipal employees a transit pass incentive as an alternative to paid parking.
   Eco Passes are a simple way for you to offer your municipal employees a benefit that has a positive impact on both the environment and your bottom line. Employers pay a reduced fare rate, distribute as many cards as they want, and pay only for the rides taken. There are no implementation costs, and administrative assistance and technical support are free.
Companies are relocating to more walkable and transit-accessible places.

### A FEW SMART FACTS

**Home values are 42% higher when located near high-frequency public transit.**

Source: American Public Transportation Association

**A household can save up to $10,000 and reduce 30% of their greenhouse gas emissions by using public transit and owning one less car.**

Source: American Public Transportation Association

**Communities that invest in public transit reduce the nation’s carbon emissions by almost 37 million metric tons annually.**

Source: American Public Transportation Association

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### SMART GROWTH ON THE GROUND

Central Falls Green and Complete Streets Ordinance

After over 18 months of work alongside more than 20 partner organizations, including Grow Smart RI, the City of Central Falls unanimously passed this landmark ordinance in January 2018. It is the first municipal ordinance in New England to require both complete streets – ones that safely accommodate users of all ages and abilities – and green infrastructure, including street trees and drainage foliage, on all public and private roadway projects. This ordinance marks a step forward from previous complete streets resolutions and serves as a model for other cities and towns throughout New England to implement similar policies.
We must be strategic when it comes to our shift to clean energy.

It is important that we transition our energy resources towards clean, sustainable options like solar and wind. Governor Raimondo has set a statewide clean energy goal of 1000 MW renewable energy by 2020 – moving Rhode Island in the right direction with respect to reducing our reliance on limited, environmentally dirty fossil fuels. This goal is ambitious but necessary, especially given the urgency of rising greenhouse gas levels as well as federal inaction in reducing our reliance on fossil fuels.

But how we achieve this goal is just as important as reaching the goal itself. Unfortunately, our statewide clean energy programs have had the unintended but environmentally damaging consequences of encouraging solar development on prime forestland and farmland. This is largely because Rhode Island does not have any location-based incentives in place to constrain solar development to developed or disturbed areas like parking lots or former landfills, rather than farms or forests. This lack of guidance and regulation has unintentionally encouraged renewable energy developers to locate their projects in fragile, natural resource-rich areas.
Clearing forested land in particular for renewable energy development can make it more expensive and difficult to meet the greenhouse gas reduction objectives outlined in the 2014 Resilient Rhode Island Act. Electricity consumption only contributes about 20% to our statewide annual greenhouse gas emissions, so even if and when all of our energy comes from renewable energy sources, there will still be a need to reduce 80% of our emissions. The RI forest has been estimated by DEM to be able to absorb approximately 30% of RI’s annual greenhouse gas emissions, so it is critical that it be conserved.

Although renewable energy is important, it is unacceptable and unnecessary for us to be destroying vulnerable ecosystems like forests as we work to achieve our clean energy goals. We can and should achieve our greenhouse gas reduction and renewable energy development goals while avoiding damage to our natural resources and local community character.

Targeted economic incentives to encourage renewable energy development on developed or disturbed locations are critical to protecting our farms, forests, and community character. Other Northeastern states, including Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Jersey are implementing such incentives.

We can accelerate renewable energy development and ensure a “win-win” for our environment and quality of place if we reach consensus that we must adopt renewable energy siting incentives that promote environmental and natural resource sustainability and remain mindful of these natural assets. It is important to get renewable energy siting right so that future generations can enjoy an environmentally vibrant, beautiful, and green Rhode Island.
RENEWABLE ENERGY SITING

Policy Recommendations

STATE

☑ Develop targeted economic incentives to encourage renewable energy development on developed or disturbed locations.
Implement incentives to encourage renewable energy development on landfills, brownfields, rooftops, parking lots, and gravel pits, with corresponding disincentives for proposed development on open space, prime agricultural soils, or large unfragmented forests.

☑ Look to other states for guidance on incentive structures.
Draw upon the resources and experiences of other states that have revised or are in the process of revising their siting reforms, including New Jersey, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Connecticut.

☑ Identify and map areas throughout the state where utility scale renewable energy development should be encouraged and discouraged.
Determine specific areas throughout the state where development should be encouraged, such as brownfields, landfills, and parking lots, as well as areas where development should be discouraged, such as prime agricultural soils, large unfragmented forests, and critical habitat. In doing so, we can protect vulnerable lands while providing predictable and easily permittable locations for developers.

☑ Encourage solar development on schools and municipal buildings.
Help schools save money in operation costs and build strong community support for renewable energy by developing solar on school buildings and in municipal parking lots.

☑ Develop training and guidance for municipal officials.
Provide municipal officials with objective, applicable options that guide them through important considerations related to solar siting and describe how to accelerate solar development while avoiding conflict between residents and developers.

LOCAL

☑ Encourage renewable energy into developed and disturbed locations and use local zoning ordinances to discourage the development of forests and important habitat and prime agricultural soils.
When drafting solar ordinances, use guidance from New York’s Scenic Hudson’s publication as a key resource in identifying important considerations and potential concerns.

☑ Identify community priorities early in the ordinance-drafting process.
Facilitate open discussions with residents about priorities and shared concerns related to solar development to establish unified community-specific goals in the ordinance-drafting process.

*Guide to Boost Clean Energy Development and Protect Natural Assets Important for Quality of Life and Economy
Smart growth policies help protect and preserve our precious natural resources.

A FEW SMART FACTS

99.6% of Rhode Island schools could save money by going solar.

Rhode Island is one of the top three states with potential for schools to go solar.

Source: The Solar Foundation

SMART GROWTH ON THE GROUND

Forbes Street Solar Project, East Providence

In 2010, the East Providence City Council adopted a comprehensive plan that identified the 70-acre former landfill as a good location for renewable energy development. This is an excellent example of how previously developed or disturbed sites can be used for solar projects, rather than vulnerable natural resources like farms or forests. This specific project repurposes the landfill to generate 9-megawatts of electricity while remaining buffered from neighboring properties and preserving urban wildlife habitat.
CONSERVATION OF FORESTS

Although Rhode Island is the second most densely-populated state in the country, it is still about 55% forested.

Our forests support recreational and tourism opportunities, improve our air quality and drinking water, reduce flooding concerns, and provide substantial economic benefits. Rhode Island-grown forestry products support over 3,300 jobs and contribute about $710 million dollars annually to the state, according to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RI DEM).

Forests also play a critical role in addressing the impact of climate change. It is urgent that we reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and transition to renewable energy resources, but not at the expense of our forested land or outstanding, but fragile urban-rural balance.

Solar arrays and wind facilities can ensure that our future energy is sustainable, but according to the Nature Conservancy, forest preservation is the most economical way to mitigate climate change because trees are able to absorb and store carbon that has already been released into the atmosphere. RI DEM estimates that Rhode Island forests can absorb and store about 30% of our annual statewide greenhouse gas emissions. And the value of this forested land is not only environmental, but economic: the annual carbon storage value of Rhode Island forests is estimated to be about $39 million.
In order to reach the greenhouse gas reduction levels required by the 2014 Resilient Rhode Island Act, we can allow no further net loss of forest, according to the 2016 Rhode Island Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Plan. However, Rhode Island is currently losing forestland faster than any other state. As forests are fragmented into smaller tracts, their value to timber harvesting, clean water protection, recreational use, and wildlife habitat is greatly reduced. Meaningful changes to this trend require that the state lead by example: we cannot fund the conversion of forestland to non-forest uses or provide economic incentives that encourage development of any kind - residential subdivisions, "big box" retail stores, or renewable energy - on forestland. Rhode Island forests are a vital economic and cultural resource that demand our immediate attention and protection if they are to be preserved for existing and future generations.
FOREST CONSERVATION

Policy Recommendations

STATE

- Establish an advisory group to assess all reasonable options to prevent the further loss of forested land. Evaluate the cost and feasibility of options like additional statewide sources of funding to purchase development rights, as well as the development of economic incentives for forest land owners to not develop their forest such as the purchase of carbon storage rights.

- Recognize the role that forests play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Acknowledge these important carbon storage benefits in statewide climate change-related policies and actions.

LOCAL

- Implement farm and forest business-friendly zoning. Amend zoning to provide farmers and forest-owners with more flexible accessory business uses on their land, encourage economically-viable and eco-friendly operations, and reduce intensive development pressure.

- Explore local options to prevent further fragmentation of forest. Re-examine and consider adopting creative land use techniques such as conservation development, village zoning, and transfer of development rights to accommodate growth while protecting core forest land from fragmentation.

- Give priority to purchasing forest land as permanently protected open space. Ensure that land use policies and comprehensive community-based plans encourage no additional net loss of our vulnerable forest resources.

Our forests support recreational and tourism activities and counter climate change.
Rhode Island-grown forest products generate $700 million annually.

**A FEW SMART FACTS**

- **75% of Rhode Islanders get clean and safe drinking water from reservoirs protected by forests.**
  
  Source: Rhode Island Woodland Partnership

- **Rhode Island forests can attenuate the carbon emissions of approximately 7 million automobiles.**
  
  Source: Rhode Island DEM

- **We’re losing forest land more rapidly than any state – about 48% that existed in 2000 is projected to be destroyed or fragmented because of urban growth by 2050.**
  
  Source: Rhode Island Woodland Partnership

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**SMART GROWTH ON THE GROUND**

**Rhode Island Woodland Partnership Strategic Plan 2017-2021**

In April 2013, a network of foresters, landowners, conservationists, and professionals came together to develop and implement a shared vision for forest conservation in Rhode Island. This continued partnership has produced a comprehensive, practical strategic plan for the sustainable management and long-term protection of our forested land. The Rhode Island Woodland Partnership Plan increases the impact of forest conservation measures that benefit our economy, health, and values for generations to come.
Growth policies are only smart if they benefit the many, not just the few. Promoting smart growth is critical for achieving a more vibrant economy and stronger communities.
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To learn more about Grow Smart RI's work to improve quality of life for all Rhode Islanders, visit www.GrowSmartRI.org.

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