

Just say no to sprawl

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Scott Wolf, executive director of GrowSmart Rhode Island, says the state “has an opportunity to lead the nation in financially and energy-efficient development and living patterns.”

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PROVIDENCE — In a challenge to suburban sprawl, state housing officials yesterday pledged up to \$10 million to support the development of more integrated communities, designed to preserve open space.

Rhode Island Housing’s “KeepSpace” initiative aims to prevent further loss of the state’s dwindling forests, and conserve land, energy, water and other natural resources by “changing the paradigm” of development, Rhode Island Housing’s executive director, Richard Godfrey, said at a news conference.

The new paradigm seeks to recast the negative associations with “density” by creating attractive yet more compact communities that offer easy access to shopping, jobs and public transportation. This design would reduce reliance on a major source of energy consumption and pollution — the automobile.

Godfrey said that KeepSpace represents an “unprecedented partnership” among economic development experts, business leaders and members of environmental agencies, who will work together with city and town officials and residents to design these communities.

The \$10-million pledge by the state’s housing agency was made before about 35 people — including members of the state housing agency, planning departments and development groups — who sat overlooking a sun-dappled Mashapaug Pond, next to J.T. Owens Field. The site, which is across the

street from an industrial park, was chosen, Godfrey said, because it's a "good case example of the type of blending ... in terms of sensible development."

Scott Wolf, executive director of the nonprofit GrowSmart Rhode Island, said "Rhode Island has an opportunity to lead the nation in financially and energy-efficient development and living patterns."

State housing officials have sent out requests for proposals from developers for the first of three to five KeepSpace communities, which the agency defines as ones that encourage efficient use of land and other natural resources by creating a mix of rental and owner-occupied homes — one-fourth of which would qualify as "affordable" housing — along with commercial work space and stores, according to the state's June 19 Request For Proposals (RFP).

But, the experts say, one of the biggest challenges to such developments will be zoning laws. In some communities, two-acre lots are the norm, said Kevin Flynn, of the state division of planning. "KeepSpace is about how we change the business of development in Rhode Island," he said. Land use is now "outpacing our population growth by 9 to 1." This new approach "provides opportunities for development in the state ... without losing our soul," he said.

These projects can piggyback on existing developments, such as adding commercial work space to a residential area, or the other way around. The state is seeking four types of development: urban, suburban, "transit-oriented" and rural, according to the RFP.

"Ideally, at least 25 percent of the homes in the proposed development must be affordable," the state says in the RFP, "including rentals and homes for sale." The affordability criteria would be based on 80 percent of the area's median income for rentals, and 100 percent for homes for sale. A minimum of 30 units of housing also must be proposed for homes affordable to households at or below 60 percent of the area median income.

Examples of existing developments that are similar to the types being proposed are on Elmwood Avenue and Broad Street in Providence; North Main Street in North Providence; Newport Heights in Newport; and the "mill village" in Burrillville, said Rhode Island Housing's Godfrey.

The \$10 million will include a mix of maybe \$8 million in bonds and another \$2 million in grants and other subsidies, Rhode Island Housing's chief financial officer, Thomas F. Hogg, said in an interview. The state funds will be distributed in increments of about \$2 million to \$4 million per year, he said, and supplemented with financing from other sources.