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A giant step for Westerly gateway project

Westerly Becomes One of first KeepSpace Communities

By Ellyn Moran Santiago/The Sun Staff

WESTERLY – The Westerly Land Trust and Watch Hill Properties today received notification of funding from Rhode Island Housing for the Westerly Gateway project proposed for several properties along Main Street and the Pawcatuck River. The project includes land near the Westerly Train Station.



Westerly becomes one of first KeepSpace communities. Photo by Daniel Hyland

The proposal includes construction of housing, retail and office space along with public access to the river, and will replace two vacant gas stations and a former used-car lot.

The amount of the funding was not disclosed at Thursday's press conference in Providence announcing the project and three others statewide.

Funding for the project comes through the KeepSpace program, which is described as being a community that includes "a good home, strong commerce, a healthy environment, sensible infrastructure, positive community impact and integrated arts, recreation, culture and religion."

The Rhode Island Housing-led KeepSpace program is a collaboration of partners including the state departments of environmental management, health and economic development as well as the Coastal Resource Management Council. The program is intended to establish communities in which homes, shops and offices, the arts and recreation all co-exist in a healthy -- and protected -- environment; communities where stakeholders -- citizens and developers, government and business -- have a voice in the project.

The Westerly KeepSpace community project team includes the land trust, Watch Hill Properties (Royce Family Foundation), SERA Architects, Cherenzia Associates as engineers and Thomas J. Liguori Jr. as project attorney. The development of the river and train station-area sites is called a Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and Village Center that would include "a significant number and variety of residential options."

Thursday's announcement was for the first round of funding under the program. Three other projects were also identified as worthy of funding in Providence, Cranston and Pawtucket.

Concerns about funding the project when the state has proposed to take some \$26 million from RI Housing coffers were addressed by a RI Housing spokesperson who said that while there may be "some delay in funding, we must not let that hurt our ability to move forward with plans for KeepSpace."

"KeepSpace is a great example of the type of innovative thinking that we need to do to help the state move in the direction of long-term social and financial stability," according to a statement issued by RI Housing. "The daily headlines reinforce what we've known for some time – we need to view land use and development from a different perspective. We must also use all of our funds strategically, efficiently and effectively to alleviate the state's housing shortage. The KeepSpace initiative offers an integrated long-term solution and these first selected communities represent the future. By developing viable and sustainable KeepSpace Communities, we can build a better future for Rhode Island."

The Westerly Land Trust, the Royce Family Foundation and WH Properties have over the last several years been buying up parcels of land along the river and have an option to purchase the empty site near the train station off Friendship and Canal streets. These are the sites of future KeepSpace communities, with help from RI Housing and its collaborators' funding.

"The Westerly Land Trust and Charles Royce share the desire to create a plan for our properties that will enhance downtown Westerly and its entrance from Connecticut and the railroad station and which contribute to Westerly's unique character and sense of place," Land Trust Director Harvey Perry said Thursday morning.

A key component of the project is to create viable and sustainable communities in a collaborative way. Dubbed the community visioning process, as in each KeepSpace community, the land trust, Royce and RI Housing will be reaching out to citizens, businesses and community leaders to seek their involvement in the planning process.

A statement from RI Housing and Westerly Land Trust said, "The project will build on existing community infrastructure and be directly adjacent to Main Street and the North East Corridor Rail line. Some commercial enterprises will be included in the development itself, but the plan will also enhance existing and future business opportunities in and around downtown Westerly.

"The proposal will make a major contribution to the environment by reducing reliance on automobiles, remediating under-used and contaminated lands and improving visual and

actual access to the Pawcatuck River. The sponsor, Westerly Land Trust, sees the redevelopment of this town center as an essential element of its mission to preserve undeveloped lands around Westerly. The development will positively impact Westerly by allowing growth in the most cost-effective manner and bringing major upgrades to the town center. It will also improve the connections among all of Westerly's neighborhoods. The downtown location, attractiveness, and mixture of uses of this development will make it an integral part of and enhance the community's cultural, recreational, art and religious fabric."

Perry said the key component, the 'visioning' process, is critical to the success of the Westerly KeepSpace project.

"This is where we engage the community and encourage wide community study and discussion," he said.

Reached this afternoon for comment, Liguori said he was excited about the collaboration.

"It's not going to be the usual individual buyer with a profit motive coming up with an idea," he said. "We have this neat partnership as well as a state commitment, so instead of the development of these critical properties being the result of a reaction, they are instead the product of substantial input from state and local government, agencies and citizens. That's the thing that makes it very exciting."

Liguori said the town was recently briefed on the KeepSpace project and gave the plan its overwhelming support and blessing – in writing.

"They have embraced the project," Liguori said. To wit, Town Manager Joseph T. Turo has offered to be the point person and liaison between the municipal government and the project team and has even made suggestions about possible connections; like the empty former police station on Union Street, just feet from the proposed riverfront mixed-use project. Liguori said town officials supported the idea of the project and its potential for positive economic growth and development, housing and jobs, with recreational opportunities and a positive environmental impact as bonuses.

"The collaboration of a number of agencies and governments joining to provide input and options for the community at the earliest stage has the potential to positively affect how land use decisions are made for the long-term," he said.