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**DEVELOPMENT**

## Five Questions With: Richard Godfrey

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*In May, Rhode Island Housing announced the first four projects to be awarded funding through the \$10 million KeepSpace initiative. Providence Business News recently spoke with Rhode Island Housing Executive Director Richard Godfrey about the program and the progress that's been made.*

**PBN:** Can we start with a little background about the KeepSpace initiative – what is it, when did the project start and how much funding does it have? Which organizations are running it?

**GODFREY:** KeepSpace is a groundbreaking approach to creating thriving, lasting communities. Initiated by Rhode Island Housing in August 2007, KeepSpace embraces broad-based, respectful partnerships among those committed to building and preserving a Rhode Island in which families can thrive, children can learn and grow and communities can prosper. All KeepSpace Communities will integrate six core elements: good homes, a healthy environment, strong commerce, sensible infrastructure, positive community impact and integrated arts, culture, recreation and religion.

KeepSpace is about doing things differently. We are reaching out to, and forging permanent productive partnerships with, equally committed agencies and individuals whose disciplines touch upon the development and preservation of our natural and built



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"OVER THE PAST 12 months we have vividly re-learned the critical link between homes and the economy," said Richard Godfrey, Rhode Island Housing executive director.

environments. The communities will thrive economically and socially while maintaining a clean, healthy environment.

KeepSpace embraces all stakeholders as partners, including: residents in local and surrounding areas; business leaders; the work force; developers; state and local planners; various other public, private and nonprofit agencies; and an extensive advisory committee, consisting of agencies such as the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, GrowSmart Rhode Island, the R.I. Economic Development Corporation, the R.I. Department of Transportation and the R.I. Department of Health.

Rhode Island Housing is investing \$10 million to fund the first four developments over the next three to five years.

**PBN: What progress has been made on the four KeepSpace Communities announced in May?**

**GODFREY:** An important part of KeepSpace is to listen to and respect everyone's ideas and concerns and ultimately find ways to create a community that is embraced by all and has a positive impact on everyone in it and around it. Through the Comprehensive KeepSpace Community Design phase, Rhode Island Housing has been working with each of the four selected communities – Cranston, Pawtucket/Central Falls, Providence's Olneyville neighborhood and Westerly – to engage all stakeholders and ensure the needs of each community are met.

In September, Rhode Island Housing contracted with a consulting team led by the Horsley Witten Group to assist the four KeepSpace Communities and the advisory committee in crafting and implementing an effective engagement strategy. The Olneyville team, led by Olneyville Housing Corporation, has begun interviewing residents, business owners and other stakeholders and is planning for community meetings in January or February.

Most of the teams anticipate having designs in place by spring or summer 2009. At the same time, the groups are continuing to move forward with elements of their initiative. In Olneyville, the YMCA has committed to opening a facility at Riverside Park. And both Olneyville Housing and Pawtucket Citizens Development Corporation – the lead agency for the Pawtucket/Central Falls KeepSpace Community – are moving forward with the purchase and redevelopment of foreclosed properties in their target areas. PCDC is also collaborating with neighborhood community groups to discuss sharing personnel. And in Westerly, organizers are considering a design competition with some of Rhode Island's architectural and engineering students.

**PBN: Going forward, are there completion dates set up for those projects? And are there plans to bring more development projects into the program?**

**GODFREY:** The economic crisis is hindering all development activity, including KeepSpace. However, we continue to make progress on each of the four communities through the Comprehensive KeepSpace Community Design phase. Once actual construction is ready to proceed, we will be prepared to do so quickly and with confidence that the outcomes will be successful.

These first four KeepSpace Communities will serve as the models for future KeepSpace Communities and other initiatives throughout Rhode Island. Rhode Island Housing has already revised the criteria in its Qualified Action Plan, which guides the use of its Low Income Housing Tax Credit program, to give priority to projects that are part of a KeepSpace Community and to proposals that embrace the KeepSpace principles. We are confident that our efforts are working toward building a healthier, more stable future for all Rhode Islanders.

**PBN: A few months ago, it was announced that the projects would be involved in a streamlined state-permitting process. How does that work? Has it been effective?**

**GODFREY:** The KeepSpace Advisory Committee has made considerable progress in opening the lines of communication and establishing a more coordinated and cooperative approach to community development. DEM has established a streamlined process for the review of regulatory issues involving the four KeepSpace Communities. Each of these communities is being assigned a DEM Project Review Team, rather than each developer having to seek out every permit separately, as was the standard practice. This means that, for the first time in Rhode Island, all DEM-related permits are being handled cooperatively and cohesively. As the community developments progress, all permit requests will be handled by the assigned team of DEM experts. Several of our KeepSpace Communities – Olneyville and Cranston – are already collaborating with DEM on issues they expect to encounter and all four of the teams have praised the DEM-streamlined process as a great benefit for their initiatives.

Equally important, all of the advisory committee members have been and will continue to be engaged in the process of framing out community designs that are consistent with the goals of the KeepSpace initiative. Advisory committee members have participated in site visits to all four communities and are working together to identify challenges, opportunities, resources and next steps.

At its monthly meetings, the advisory committee engages in open dialogue surrounding development-related challenges and ways to better understand how each partner agency

or organization is impacted. Some of the topics that have been discussed include: the water shortage facing many Rhode Island communities, the Land Use 2025 Plan and the challenges posed by rising sea levels.

**PBN: Why is this initiative important in Rhode Island, especially during tough economic times?**

**GODFREY:** Over the past 12 months we have vividly re-learned the critical link between homes and the economy. In recent years, the importance of a healthy environment has been brought home. In recent months, we have been educated about the incredible costs of our future infrastructure needs. For a vibrant future, Rhode Island cannot pursue these challenges independently. We need to work together for health and prosperity. KeepSpace is the method to achieve a better state for the community called Rhode Island.

Some economic benefits from KeepSpace will be seen immediately. Throughout the process, we will be putting Rhode Islanders and Rhode Island businesses to work. Good jobs within the many areas connected to community development – among them construction, land development, environmental protection and preservation, transportation, design and public infrastructure – will be needed to begin work in the four inaugural communities.

KeepSpace will ultimately promote and enhance the success of local businesses, as each community will be designed in a way to incorporate homes and commerce in healthy, attractive, walkable settings. The communities will be designed so that business owners can live in the neighborhoods in which they work – a characteristic that helps to build a sense of pride and commitment to each neighborhood. Coupled with sensible transportation infrastructure, KeepSpace communities will enhance the state socially and economically while minimizing our ecological footprint.