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REAL ESTATE

Five Questions With: Scott Wolf

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Nonprofit Grow Smart Rhode Island has for the last 10 years been advocating against sprawl in Rhode Island. Providence Business News recently asked Executive Director Scott Wolf what legislation and initiatives the group will be following this year.

PBN: This year and in this General Assembly session, what are going to be the big issues that Grow Smart will be tracking and advocating?

WOLF: There are several and they all relate to our overriding objective of helping Rhode Island achieve sustainable prosperity by investing more systematically in our state's numerous assets as we seek to neutralize our weaknesses. One key priority for us is to work with our coalition partners and R.I. General Assembly allies to establish, as part of a state economic recovery initiative, a new targeted R.I. Historic Preservation Investment Tax Credit program for new applicants. A second focus will be ensuring enough funding for the R.I. Public Transit Authority so that it can continue to avoid major service cutbacks at a time when demand is growing for public transit options in Rhode Island. We also plan to work again with our partners in the New Public Transit Alliance to get a Green Light Extension bill through the General Assembly and to persuade the governor to sign this bill that would make bus service speedier with no reduction in public safety or increase in public cost. We also want to engage as many legislators and other concerned citizens as possible in the long-range study RIPTA is undertaking about what should be the main components of a first-rate transit system for Rhode Island's future.



PBN PHOTO / MATTHEW HEALEY

"IF WE AS a society don't learn from our past wasteful habits and the economic toll of environmentally destructive policies, we will doom ourselves to a future of mediocrity and underachiever status," said Grow Smart Executive Director Scott Wolf.

Our commitment to appropriately sited and well-designed affordable housing in urban, town and village centers will continue in this General Assembly session. As a member of the Executive Committee of Housing WorksRI we will be helping to promote timely spend down of the economically stimulating affordable-housing construction bond money remaining from the 2006 housing bond issue while also pressing for continuation of the Neighborhood Opportunities Program's investment in housing and community development in the state's economically distressed neighborhoods.

To make our substantial water supply the economic competitive advantage that it should be we will be helping our partners in the Coalition for Water Security to pass a major water conservation measure, one designed to ensure that we can readily supply adequate water for priority uses such as economic development and agriculture, rather than dissipating this precious resource through unnecessary over watering of lawns.

Because we consider the federal economic stimulus package just signed into law as a major opportunity for smart investments in Rhode Island's future, we will be playing a watchdog role regarding the spending of that money, promoting allocation of as much of the stimulus money as possible for projects and programs that advance urban revitalization, transit and pedestrian-friendly development and preservation in our outlying areas of our rural character and farming.

To maintain the Rhode Island farming sector's under-publicized economic momentum we will continue to support the farm bureau's push for state estate tax relief for farmers with a long track record of agricultural productivity.

PBN: With Rhode Island mayors pushing for some of the federal stimulus package, what infrastructure updates or additions do you think might be the most important?

WOLF: Although we haven't had a chance to review all of the proposals from municipalities and state government for infrastructure investment using stimulus money, there are at least several projects on the drawing boards that we think should be seriously considered as part of the stimulus funding mix:

1. Support for the four model smart-growth, mixed-use KeepSpace Community projects that have been awarded some financial backing from Rhode Island Housing;

- In downtown Westerly, The Westerly Landing/Depot Project to revitalize areas at either end of downtown Westerly and transform them into village centers with easy access to local bus and commuter/interstate train transportation.

- On the Pawtucket/Central Falls line, a major proposed transit-oriented, mixed-use redevelopment project that can create the critical mass of residential and commercial activity required for reestablishment of train service in this area.

- In Olneyville, a creative mixed-use, mixed-income project spearheaded by Olneyville Housing, one of our state's award winning nonprofit community development corporations.

- In the Knightsville section of Cranston, a major adaptive-reuse project at Cranston Print Works featuring affordable and market-rate housing, new commercial enterprises and new municipal facilities such as a library and fire station.

2. Timely completion of the proposed commuter rail line between Wickford and Downtown Providence with a major intermodal stop and facility at T.F. Green Airport.

3. A proposed "back to the future" project in Providence, establishment of a street car system for some of the most densely populated and commercially intensive portions of the city.

4. Long awaited repairs to the Sakonnet River Bridge and the Interstate 95 overpass bridge in Pawtucket.

5. Efforts to make historic government buildings in our urban, town and village centers more energy efficient and structurally sound

6. Rehabbing and remarketing foreclosed properties throughout Rhode Island.

PBN: Rhode Island's economy and the national economy have tanked. Is now a good time to start a conversation about sustainability?

WOLF: Absolutely. If we as a society don't learn from our past wasteful habits and the economic toll of environmentally destructive policies, we will doom ourselves to a future of mediocrity and underachiever status. For too long we have cultivated the notion that the best we can hope for in our state and country is a balance between environmental and economic objectives. In the new era we are entering featuring a depleted supply of fossil fuels and increasingly mobile capital and talent drawn to locales with a high quality of life, our environmental and economic health are inextricably linked, not just candidates for peaceful coexistence. Because Rhode Island has so many outstanding natural resources in such a small geographic area, we should be able over time to leapfrog ahead of many other states by consciously linking our environmental protection and economic development policies. To fail to go down this path would be a colossal missed opportunity.

PBN: How does Rhode Island's size play toward Grow Smart's goals?

WOLF: Rhode Island's compactness and high population density make our state well suited for an expansion of public transit. Our intense concentration of historic buildings and neighborhoods make a strong targeted historic rehabilitation tax credit an important economic development tool. Our remarkable urban/rural balance – as the second most densely populated and 15th most forested state in the nation – in such a small land area gives us both an opportunity to continue to be a national leader in the proportion of locally grown farm products we are able to consume and a quality of life edge over many other states with a less pronounced or compact urban rural mix. Our small size also lends itself well to regional planning and regional property-tax sharing, two initiatives we need to pursue now more than ever to overcome some of the diseconomies of scale that may be an unfortunate byproduct of our small size.

PBN: A lot of developers are on the edge of their seat, waiting to find out whether the R.I. Historical Preservation Investment Tax Credit program will be restarted. You have been an advocate for that program – any thoughts on if, when or how it might be restarted?

WOLF: As mentioned earlier a key 2009 priority for us is to work with our coalition partners and General Assembly allies to establish, as part of a state economic recovery initiative, a new targeted historic tax credit program for new applicants. We are currently working on a proposal for a tax credit that addresses frequently voiced Rhode Island General Assembly concerns about the old program by making private social clubs and single-family residences ineligible for the new program. We also advocate that any new historic tax credit be allocated to larger, more costly projects over a three-to-four-year period versus [allocating] in one lump sum. And we are open to a program with a somewhat lower baseline credit than the previous program, provided that participating projects satisfying certain economic or social objectives, such as bringing new commercial activity or affordable housing to a neighborhood, particularly an economically distressed neighborhood.