



KeepSpace aims to foster a stronger community

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PAWTUCKET — With its focus on looking at Pawtucket and Central Falls as one big neighborhood that can benefit from improvements, the first meeting of a new think tank group known as KeepSpace was held at the Blackstone Valley Visitors Center on Wednesday morning.

Founded by Rhode Island Housing, the KeepSpace initiative seeks to foster broad-based, respectful partnerships among residents, local businesses, non-profit organizations and municipal and state agencies for the betterment and preservation of neighborhoods. Pawtucket/Central Falls is one of four such KeepSpace communities that have been chosen to be part of the initiative in Rhode Island. The other three are Cranston, Olneyville and downtown Westerly. Rhode Island Housing has allocated up to \$10 million to help fund the development of the first KeepSpace communities.

According to Richard Godfrey, executive director of Rhode Island Housing, the concept is based around the idea of coordinating the many developments and programs already happening in the area, as well as discussing the aspects that need improvement, in order to create neighborhoods with nice homes, better streets and parks, thriving local businesses, and a cleaner environment.

Godfrey added that there are six main elements of a KeepSpace community: a good home, a healthy environment, strong commerce, sensible infrastructure, positive community impact and integrated arts, recreation, culture and religion.

He pointed out that the Pawtucket Citizens Development Corporation (PCDC), Rhode Island Housing, Pawtucket Foundation, Progreso Latino, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, REACH and many other organizations have been working together for a better

Pawtucket and Central Falls for years, and results can be seen in both communities.

Godfrey explained that KeepSpace is about the community, but also about recognizing that the community operates at many different levels.

“It is about both what is built and the social environment, and how the two have to be integrated,” he said. He added that more can be accomplished by looking at Pawtucket and Central Falls as one community rather than an area divided by city lines.

Godfrey added that the main idea behind KeepSpace is to keep a dialogue going between all members of the community—from the residents who live there to the businesses, social service agencies, or municipal departments that serve it.

To that end, government and community leaders from Pawtucket and Central Falls were invited to attend the first of a series of planned workshops. The hope is that many will be part of a key team that continues to meet throughout the year to guide the development of a comprehensive community design plan for Pawtucket and Central Falls.

The kick-off meeting was meant to provide an overview of some of the regional projects and initiatives that are happening or are planned for the near future. KeepSpace representatives spoke to how many of these developments can be implemented together.

Pawtucket Mayor James Doyle noted the progress that has been to transform Pawtucket’s abandoned mills into mixed-use facilities offering commercial, retail, office and residential space. “These facilities are once again becoming the centers of commerce and enterprise that are creating a whole new wave of opportunity for people seeking a better lifestyle,” said Doyle.

Doyle said he was pleased to be part of KeepSpace because it will provide Pawtucket “with the opportunity and resources to bring this renaissance to the next level, connecting our initiatives and plans of the recent past with the needs of the greater community and an eye to the needs for a vibrant future.”

Among those who spoke of the initiatives already underway, Alex Sommers of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council talked about the Broad Street revitalization plan, Pawtucket Planning Director Michael Cassidy gave an update on the redevelopment of the train depot, and Thomas Mann, executive director of the Pawtucket Foundation, outlined the proposal for a five-story, mixed-use building and parking garage on

Roosevelt Avenue.

However, during an input session, other participants brought up several issues and areas of concern that need to be addressed in the comprehensive design plan. Mann spoke of the importance of a good school system in attracting both new residents and businesses, while Julissa Rivera of the PCDC said there is a need for more community centers for local youth.

Dianne Newman, executive director of the YWCA of Greater Rhode Island, expressed the need for more services and programs designed for people who speak little or no English. She also said efforts should be made to reach out to the area's illegal immigrant population, many of whom are eligible for social services programs but don't fill out applications for fear of legal action or deportation.

Ramon Martinez of Progreso Latino said that beyond housing and programs, there is a broad need to create better economic conditions. Noting the current 12.1 percent unemployment rate in the area, he said, "We can talk about building pretty houses, but we need jobs."

James Ruthowski, of the Pawtucket Housing Authority, also spoke of the importance of creating more jobs. He suggested that more effort should be made to bring manufacturers back into some of the vacant mills rather than concentrating so much on creating residential spaces.

Colleen Ndoye, a revitalization coordinator with PCDC, expressed concerns about public safety and said it is important to include representatives from both cities' police departments in any discussions about community improvements, while Henry Kinch Sr., representing the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, spoke of the importance of considering public transportation needs in the master plan.

Maia Small, a local architect, stressed the importance of understanding the particular character of a neighborhood and how it works from the point of view of those who live there.