

# *The Valley* **Breeze**

## 'Radical' KeepSpace initiative lifts off

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From commuter rail and bike path extensions to walkable, livable neighborhoods, a new redevelopment initiative lifting off locally is suggesting big things are in store.

A portion of Pawtucket and neighboring Central Falls, centered at the old train depot on the line between the two, has been selected as one of four neighborhoods statewide to take part in what promoters are calling a "radical" and "revolutionary" \$10 million KeepSpace program from Rhode Island Housing.

For the first time, say officials, the housing agency is taking a "holistic" approach to neighborhood redevelopment, bringing all persons and parties interested in the future of their community together to discuss how to best reinvent the neighborhood.

It's the first step as part of a growing realization that the way development has always been done in Rhode Island, with each individual planning a project and "pushing it through the regulatory process," does not bring about the best neighborhoods possible, say organizers.

"This compromise is the result of a lot of battles over a lot of years," said Richard Godfrey, executive director of Rhode Island Housing. "I've told my people that we need to participate in a broader discussion."

"That's a challenge, but I'm encouraged that people have said 'we want to find a better way'," Godfrey continued. "Working together is unusual, but it's time to think more broadly."

With talk of bikeway extensions along the Blackstone River, the continued emergence of the Broad Street regeneration plan, brownfield grants available for such aging mill buildings as the Conant Thread Factory, and ongoing plans for housing and mixed-use development, there is a significant need for state and local agencies to have a "communications vehicle" like the KeepSpace initiative to discuss all issues facing a given project, said Godfrey.

Already, RI Housing officials are in the process of financing 33 new apartments and 3,500 square feet of community space in vacant lots across from CVS and the old train depot on Broad Street just over the Pawtucket line in Central Falls, he said, and that project, like others, will have input from a host of different organizations. Instead of people being surprised or annoyed when a development starts going up near them, said Godfrey, they'll now have the chance to add their point of view in the early stage and perhaps some undesirable developments will even be thwarted.

While the depot will be the approximate center of a design and development plan, said Godfrey, there are "not necessarily fixed boundaries" on how far it could expand; the KeepSpace initiative could stretch "up to Valley Falls, along the river, and laterally to Cross Street and along Roosevelt Avenue," he said.

Several community organizations are now part of a community design working group that's already met at least twice to discuss how KeepSpace principles can be carried out in the target neighborhood.

The core elements of RI Housing's KeepSpace program are:

- \* Good homes;
- \* A healthy environment;
- \* Strong commerce;
- \* Sensible infrastructure;
- \* Positive community impact;

\* And integrated arts, culture, recreation and religion.

Nancy Whit is the president of the Pawtucket Citizens Development Corporation, the applicant organization that initially sought a portion of \$10 million in RI Housing funds set aside for the KeepSpace initiative here.

Whit said she believes the Pawtucket/Central Falls neighborhood, selected from more than a dozen proposals, was chosen in part because the building blocks are already in place here in a neighborhood she believes will "easily adapt to change."

With umbrella plans like KeepSpace in place, said Whit, officials can leverage the money already received to gain far more.

"I think for the first time we have a more holistic plan, one that tries to prevent urban sprawl into the other parts of the state," said Whit. "It's a very creative way of trying to control urban sprawl and work with communities to try and strengthen neighborhoods."

Previously Whit and the PCDC have focused more on housing projects on the Pawtucket side of the border in the Broad Street neighborhood. Many of the KeepSpace principles have already been implemented in past PCDC projects, she said, just not with the same kind of resources available now through a state agency, "and not quite as holistically."

The Barton Street revitalization plan has used just \$50,000 in RI Housing funding to largely transform that neighborhood, where green spaces like the Barton Street Community Garden have been incorporated, lighting and sidewalk issues have been largely addressed, and after-school and summer programs have been started, among other things.

Though short on concrete details for how the local KeepSpace initiative will proceed, Whit said the old train depot will not likely be the spot for any future commuter rail station. The track is curved as it passes the depot, meaning it would have to be built further up the tracks.

Each of Rhode Island Housing's four target KeepSpace communities, one in Pawtucket/Central Falls, and others in Cranston, Olneyville, and Westerly, will likely end up looking very different as the years unfold, say officials, but each will show the similarities that make KeepSpace what it is.

"This is a great step forward in how we think of comprehensive planning in urban environments," said Thomas Mann, whose Pawtucket Foundation is one of many "stakeholders" in the KeepSpace initiative.

Mann told The Breeze that, perhaps more than ever, this particular area is ready for a wide-focus look, with a number of different projects moving closer to completion over the past decade.

Said Mann, the KeepSpace program shows that planning methodologies in Rhode Island are "radically changing for the better."

"KeepSpace: where neighbors meet, people work, children play ... is a groundbreaking, collaborative initiative that will create vibrant, healthy communities through Rhode Island," according to the stated goals of the organization.

"Each community will incorporate all of the KeepSpace core elements: good homes, a healthy environment, strong commerce, sensible infrastructure, positive community impact and integrated arts, culture, recreation, and religion."

It has not yet been revealed how much each of the four target KeepSpace communities will receive of the \$10 million in RI Housing money, say officials.

Other groups involved in ongoing meetings as part of the Pawtucket/Central Falls KeepSpace Community Design Working Group include the Department of Environmental Management, Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, the Department of Transportation, the Rhode Island Division of Planning, the cities of Pawtucket and Central Falls, Progreso Latino, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, and Realty Endeavors for Affordable Community Housing.