

155-4 THE POTENTIAL



**Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.**

The Road Not Taken
Robert Frost

The first three parts of this plan detailed the importance of greenspace to Rhode Island and described how the path Rhode Island's landscape has been on for generations is leading to extinction of the essential values greenspace provides. This part and the remainder of the plan try to illuminate a different, greener, path for Rhode Island's landscape future.



4-1 A Greener Path

We find ourselves at a crossroads in our long journey of progress. We sense, with increasing unease, that the familiar route we have followed for so long leads to a place we don't really want to go.

Must our future growth destroy or endanger critical open space resources and amenities?

Is it inevitable that Rhode Island's greenspace be fragmented, degraded and consumed?

There is another route to Rhode Island's future, which preserves critical resources and reconnects Rhode Islanders with the land. It requires us not to forsake the development, growth, and change we need to progress but, rather, to plan carefully what we need, to be forthright in saying where it belongs, and to be precise in how it fits into the landscape. The other road requires that we establish, analytically, the essential elements of Rhode Island's greenspace, come to consensus about which landscape features must remain immutable, and then be steadfast in our resolve that these critical features persevere.

The state's adopted future land use plan¹ clues us that it is not too late to change direction. It shows that, with planning, it is possible to, in land planner Robert Lemire's parlance... "save what we need to save *and* build what we need to build²".

¹ Rhode Island Department of Administration, Division of Planning. *Land Use 2010. State Land Use Policies and Plan*. June, 1989.

² Lemire, Robert A. *Creative Land Development Bridge to the Future*. 1979. pp. xiii-xiv.

The development trend estimates of the *State Land Use Policies and Plan* indicate that up to 148,000 additional acres could be needed for new development by year 2010. Under this "worst-case" scenario, most new development would go on "raw" land, with very little infilling or redevelopment of urban areas. If we follow such a path, developed land within the state would increase by more than three-quarters over the current level--with tremendous impact on greenspace resources very probable.

In contrast, the Plan's *preferred* 2010 land use future advocates a focused development pattern. Concentrating growth in urban infill areas, along the suburban fringe, and around town and village centers, this focused growth scenario *could spare 45,000 acres from development.*

In short, the State Land Use Plan reveals that we can house, employ, educate, transport, and entertain our people--meet all their spatial needs now and in the future--in one of two ways. One way--the current path--leads us to increasingly consume and fragment our greenspace legacy; the other road--focused growth---affords the chance for its protection.

The land use plan holds out hope, but does not fully illuminate the alternative path. Greenspace and greenways can light the path to that better future landscape.

The choice is ours.

The Promise

What promise does the greener path hold?
Imagine a Rhode Island in 2020: vibrant, confident, and green.

It is a state refocused on its traditional strengths, while vigorously embracing the future. It has made peace with its landscape, protected strategic natural resources, and preserved key links to its past. The special places and environmental features central to the lives of generations of Rhode Islanders have been secured. The landscape now remains forever recognizable, distinctively and quintessentially, *Rhode Island.*

Rhode Islanders of 2020 feel connected to their land. They live in diverse and attractive communities of all sizes. Urban neighborhoods, teeming tapestries of ethnicity, race, and income, bring cultural richness and diversity to everyday life. At the core of each revitalized neighborhood is a green commons, be it park or promenade, riverway or community garden. Village centers, foci of reinvigorated suburbs, are connected to the urban mosaic by greenway trails and bikeways reaching out from the cities. Most of the trails and bikeways were built as community efforts, bringing people of all backgrounds together to work on a common goal. Greenways have become new avenues of social, cultural, and economic intercourse as Rhode Islanders rediscovered bicycling and walking as convenient, healthy, and enjoyable means to get around their small state during much of the year.

Hundreds of thousands of tourists each year come to enjoy Rhode Island's natural and cultural attractions. They are drawn as much by the little things--the attention to detail and design--that make Rhode Island distinctive, as by the state's unrivaled bay and beaches. Many come to ride on the extensive bikeway system that makes "getting around" a part of the vacation fun. They discover Rhode Island has maintained its natural beauty and identity... ties to its origins, time-honored customs, and traditions are evident. In building and re-building its communities, they see the state has skillfully blended the best of the old--natural and built--with the new and innovative.

Thousands of small and mid-sized businesses are the foundation of the state's robust economy, but it has attracted more than its share of corporate headquarters, regional technical support and distribution centers, and "cutting edge" techno-manufacturing operations. Firms are reassured that the resources they need to grow have been providently protected; but more often than not, new and expanding firms also cite the "quality of the environment" or "lifestyle" as the reason they decided to grow in Rhode Island. They realize the importance of such intangibles in attracting and retaining talented and motivated individuals.

A most significant change, however, is in spirit. In moving around the state, one senses a swelling pride in Rhode Islanders, and a sense of community and purpose. Rhode Islanders have solved many seemingly intractable problems during the last generation. In coming to peace with their landscape, they have forged an inclusive and progressive society. They have shown that it is possible to move ahead economically, while healing and nurturing the land; to build connections among people by linking them to common ground; and to embrace the future without losing one's past. Today, their smallest state, long the butt of jokes from outsiders, stands as paradigm of economic, social, and environmental achievement for the rest of the nation.

4-2 The Next Millennium

What should the face of Rhode Island look like in the next millennium? Let us, the current generation of Rhode Islanders, assert that greenspace and greenways not only can, but must, be pivotal elements of Rhode Island's future. Let us decide that protection of natural resources will be instrumental, rather than detrimental, to progress.

A Greenspace & Greenway Goal for Rhode Island

Rhode Island will create a statewide network of greenspaces and greenways to serve as the central organizing element for the state's 21st century growth and physical development.

By 2020, Rhode Island's protected greenspace network should encompass one third of the state's land area. The network will embrace every Rhode Island community. Natural greenways will course throughout the state, following major rivers, farmland belts, island spines, and coastal barriers. An extensive bikeway and trail system will link Rhode Island's natural and cultural features to its people. No Rhode Islander will live more than 15 minutes from a greenway.

The greenspace and greenway network will be instrumental to future state environmental and developmental policy:

- ❖ *It will constitute an environmental safety net protecting the state's irreplaceable legacy of natural and cultural resources.*
- ❖ *Secondly, bikeway and trail greenways will accommodate transportation alternatives, such as bicycling and walking, fostering health and reducing pollution.*
- ❖ *Thirdly, the greenspace network will be available for public use to the fullest extent possible, facilitating access to, enjoyment of, and understanding of the outdoor environment by Rhode Islanders and visitors to the state.*
- ❖ *Finally, the network will be a nucleus for the growth, development, and rejuvenation of diverse, high quality living and working communities, harmoniously and productively blending natural and built environments.*

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