

**American Planning Association – RI Chapter
PLANNING AWARDS
SUBMISSION SUMMARY**

**MUNICIPAL LAND-USE TRAINING INITIATIVE
GROW SMART RHODE ISLAND AND PARTNERS**

Problem Statement

As sprawling development patterns threaten Rhode Island's open space, urban vitality and community character, the need for proactive, efficient and effective land-use planning is increasingly critical. In order for Rhode Island's communities to provide for growth and prosperity while preserving the state's natural resources and unique sense of place, municipal officials and staff must be fluent and comfortable with the principles and practices of sound land-use planning. At the same time land-use law and practices are becoming more complex.

Municipal officials and staff have long noted the need for training to increase their understanding of the laws and their awareness of innovative tools that can be used to promote sustainable growth. However, due to limited state and municipal resources, no coordinated training effort existed in Rhode Island prior to 2001. While a number of organizations and agencies in Rhode Island had provided training on growth and planning issues from time to time, lack of coordination amongst the different training offerings resulted in inconsistent information, uneven municipal access to training and, at times, duplication of effort.

Project Scope, Intent, Goals

In 2000, Grow Smart Rhode Island convened a coalition of agencies and organizations to launch municipal land-use training initiative. The coalition of agencies and organizations includes the American Planning Association – RI Chapter, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, Rhode Island League of Cities & Towns, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program, URI Coastal Resources Center, URI Cooperative Extension, and the United State Environmental Protection Agency.

The initiative was designed to coordinate resources from a number of entities to provide consistent training on land-use issues on a long-term, statewide basis. In addition to convening the coalition, The coalition's first training program "Making Good Land-Use Decisions," debuted in the late fall of 2001. To date, more than 260 municipal officials and staff and 20 state agency and private company staff have attended the training program. In the fall of 2003, the coalition will again offer "Making Good Land-Use Decisions" and will also offer workshops on Affordable Housing and Conservation Development.

As the convener of the Municipal Land-Use Training Initiative, Grow Smart also wrote grant applications to obtain necessary underwriting for training development and delivery costs. Funding was obtained from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the John H. Chafee Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, USEPA, RI Builders, RI Housing, RI Statewide Planning and RI DOT. Other organizations have made in-kind contributions. Grow Smart also recruited a number of land-use attorneys who volunteer their time to the training effort.

**RI APA PLANNING AWARDS
STATEMENT OF PLANNING ISSUES AND CRITERIA**

**MUNICIPAL LAND-USE TRAINING INITIATIVE
GROW SMART RHODE ISLAND AND PARTNERS**

Planning Issues

The Municipal Land-Use Training Initiative bases its determination of what specific training and workshops will be developed on the needs identified by municipal officials and staff. In a mail survey conducted in late 2000, the highest priority identified was training on conducting effective and defensible reviews. The first training program developed -- "Making Good Land-Use Decisions" -- responds to that priority. . In the training participants learn their legal authority to regulate land use on behalf of the public interest, their responsibility to ensure due process and make decisions in the public interest, the legal requirements and recommended practices for conducting land-use reviews, and how to analyze requests and drafting decisions based on legal criteria and the goals and objectives of the Local Comprehensive Plan. An underlying principle emphasized throughout the training is the importance of the Local Comprehensive Plan as the foundation for all local land-use decisions.

Workshops to be introduced this fall will focus on the specific issue of affordable housing and on the tool of Conservation Development. (The Conservation Development workshop was developed by RIDEM with support from the USEPA; the Municipal Training Initiative is taking on the work of publicizing and delivering the training.)

Criteria: Originality, Transferability, Quality, Implementation, Comprehensiveness, Merits

Originality -- One of the most innovative aspects of the first training program -- "Making Good Land-Use Decisions" -- is the approach of offering combined training to multiple entities (ie, Councils, Planning Boards, Zoning Board, Conservation Commissions, staff) from neighboring communities. This feature, which is often noted in participant evaluations, enhances the value of the training by providing an opportunity for members of different public bodies within a town to meet each other (often for the first time), understand how their different roles complement each other, and begin to think of land-use planning as a "team" effort by multiple bodies. It also provides an opportunity for members of like public bodies from neighboring communities to meet each other, thereby fostering inter-community exchange of knowledge and cooperative effort on common concerns. Another innovative aspect of the Municipal Training Initiative is the pooling of various training resources under one "umbrella."

Transferability -- The training programs developed are transferable both to additional audiences and to other states. Material from "Making Good Land-Use Decisions" has been adapted for presentation to community groups and to a workshop presented during the 2003 RI Association of Conservation Commissions conference. This fall the training will be adapted for presentation to the Rhode Island Rivers Council. Grow Smart has responded to requests from Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New Jersey for copies of the "Making Good Land-Use Decisions" materials and for information about the structure and funding of the training initiative.

Quality -- Based on evaluation forms completed by participants who attended "Making Good Land-Use Decisions," participant perception of the quality of the program is very positive. Comments include: "I found the people putting on the training sessions to be very interesting and informative." "Good range of content" "Legal information made clear" "The presenters were very accessible, approachable, and knowledgeable- I liked that they assisted each other and worked as a team . . ." "Well worth my time." "If this training were available to every new member of a board, half the

conflicts and negative dynamics which evolve on a board could be avoided." The USEPA will feature the Municipal Training Initiative in a paper "Building Capacity for Nonpoint Source Management" to be published this fall.

Implementation -- The Municipal Land-Use Training Initiative has been in operation for 24 months, from the fall of 2001 through the summer of 2003. Funding is in place to provide training for approximately 12 more months, and Grow Smart is currently seeking future funding.

Comprehensiveness -- The Municipal Land-Use Training Initiative serves municipalities throughout the state and, as programs are added this fall and in the future, covers a range of issues and planning topics.

Merits --

- Makes high quality training available at low cost to all Rhode Island municipalities.
- By pooling personnel and funding resources, responds to municipal training needs that the state and municipalities do not yet have the resources to address.
- Provides opportunity for communication between public bodies within a municipality and emphasizes the importance of cooperative effort amongst different municipal bodies to achieve planning goals.
- Provides opportunity for communication amongst neighboring municipalities.
- Through dissemination of best practices ideas and model forms, ordinances, etc., provides opportunity for transfer of knowledge among municipalities.
- Provides an informal sharing forum that bolsters the morale of citizen planners.