My name is Scott Wolf, and I am the Executive Director of Grow Smart Rhode Island.

Grow Smart Rhode Island is a statewide non-profit organization that represents a broad coalition of business and institutional leaders, urban revitalization and environmental advocates, government entities and citizens. Our coalition came together because its members believe that the Rhode Island of the future can and must be economically strong, offer opportunities for each succeeding generation to do better, and retain the natural beauty and historic charm that Rhode Islanders value and that are among our biggest selling points. But we can only achieve this dynamic future if we are careful and thoughtful in the way we manage our resources – and that includes our very limited land resources.

On March 1, 2007, I appeared before the State Planning Council to express Grow Smart Rhode Island’s deep concern that the Gateway Project site plan proposed by New Boston and the QDC did not conform to the State Guide Plan, and specifically to Land Use 2025. I noted that Quonset, including the Gateway Project, is one of those fully-serviced areas within the urban services boundary that Land Use 2025 says should be “regarded as a scarce resource that, absent significant constraints, should be developed [or redeveloped] at higher intensities and densities so as to optimize the significant public infrastructure investment.” I further noted that the proposed plan called for half the Gateway area to be devoted to a broad expanse of single-story retail development served by more than 2,000 surface parking spaces and that at build-out the proposed site plan was projected to generate approximately 1,700 jobs – 300 fewer jobs for Rhode Islanders than originally called for.

I also stated that Grow Smart Rhode Island believed that this relatively low intensity use constituted a basic inconsistency with the fundamental premise of Land Use 2025 which is that we should seek to accommodate the majority of our future growth by making efficient use of the infrastructured land within the urban services boundary.

Grow Smart has reviewed the revised site plan, dated August 6, 2007, which you are now considering. In reviewing the revised site plan and comparing it to the previous plan, we looked only at the development to be undertaken by New Boston. We did this because the land to be used for the RAV sports complex was not included in the first site plan and
because New Boston is not developing the RAV complex. In other words, in discussing changes in the New Boston development we want to make sure we are comparing apples and apples.

Grow Smart first wants to acknowledge that New Boston’s revised site plan incorporates a number of improvements that respond specifically to some of our concerns with the first site plan.

- Most significant is the introduction of two two-story office buildings along the Post Road edge of the Gateway and the increase in size of the office buildings on Parcels 2, 3, and 4. These changes increase the total square feet of office space from the 225,000 square feet shown in the original plan to 391,900 square feet in the revised plan, an increase of 74%. At the same time, the office jobs projected go from 800 in the original plan to 1,200 in the revised plan, an increase of 50%.

This increase in office jobs is not only important in terms of sheer job numbers but also in terms of wage levels, since the QDC’s Socio-Economic Review Form states that the average salaries for both management and staff are significantly higher for office positions than for hotel, retail or restaurant positions.

The increase in office jobs (coupled with a decrease in retail jobs) raises the overall number of jobs projected for the New Boston portion of the Gateway Project from 1,775 to 2,115.

- We also view as a major improvement bringing the office buildings on Parcels 2, 3, and 4 up to the street, and locating parking behind. Not only does this re-siting make the buildings relate to each other and support walkability, but it leaves open the option of introducing structured parking behind office buildings in the future.

- Another improvement is providing transit stop locations within the Gateway. While we believe that the specific locations suggested may need to be reconsidered, facilitating public transit within the park is an important step forward.

- Similarly, we are glad to see that the revised plan provides more sidewalks throughout the Gateway, thereby encouraging pedestrian traffic between buildings.

- Finally, we were pleased to see that the revised plan indicates that space will be set aside for future expansion of the existing daycare center, which Grow Smart believes is a major service for Quonset employees. However, we note that different plan drawings are
inconsistent about how the space for expansion will be carved out of Parcel 4 and suggest that the SPC ask for clarification on this point.

While the multi-floor office buildings help to increase the intensity of use within the Gateway, the amount of single-story retail space located in the New Boston development project remains extremely large. According to the numbers provided in the revised plan, the square footage of the retail space has been reduced by 5%, from 350,200 square feet in the original plan to 333,960 square feet in the current proposal. It should be noted that the total approximate footprint of the single-story retail buildings – 333,960 square feet -- is significantly larger than the total footprint of the multi-story office buildings, which we estimate at somewhere between 130,000 and 196,000 square feet, depending on how many stories some of the office buildings are. And the amount of parking provided for the retail uses is very large.

Grow Smart continues to have serious concerns about this broad expanse of single-story retail. First, it is a low-density form of development that does not use land efficiently. And, as Grow Smart stated in its original testimony, “. . . this relatively low intensity use constitutes a basic inconsistency with the fundamental premise of Land Use 2025 which is that we should seek to accommodate the majority of our future growth by making efficient use of the infrastructured land within the urban services boundary.”

Second, the single-story retail and surrounding parking results in a great deal of impermeable surface on parcels 1 and 5b. The QDC development guidelines (Section 6.7.1.3) require that not more than 80% of a parcel be covered by impermeable surface. Grow Smart questions whether those two parcels, as shown on the revised master plan, meet the impermeable surface limit established in the QDC’s own guidelines.

Third, large national chains, with their ability to cut prices, often drive smaller local businesses out of operation and pull revenue out of the local economy.
At the same time, Grow Smart acknowledges that the developers believe they need to have some retail to “drive” the development of the rest of the Gateway. If the State Planning Council determines that there are valid reasons for allowing this type of retail, then we believe every effort must be made to mitigate as much as possible the potential negative impacts. We therefore offer the following recommendations:

- Require that the office buildings along the Post Road be built during Phase 1.

- The retail footprint could be decreased by about 45,000 square feet (approximately one acre) if the planned Kohl’s were built as a two-story building rather than a one-story building. There are examples in other parts of the country of multi-story Kohl’s stores.

- Require New Boston to demonstrate that not more than 80% of any parcel will be covered by impermeable surface and that the QDC guidelines concerning parking islands are followed.

- The State Planning Council might also consider requiring New Boston to follow the North Kingstown ordinance that requires that 30% of a parking lot have tree canopy coverage.

- Require that the single-story retail buildings have significant green elements.

On the subject of the proposed RAV sports complex, Grow Smart believes that the complex, with playing fields and indoor facilities that could be used by company teams and leagues, is a use that businesses considering locating in Quonset may well look on as an amenity. Its health facilities will also be attractive to guests at the nearby hotel. And, of course, additional recreational facilities will be welcome in the community. We do recommend that if there are plans to irrigate the playing fields, and, indeed, plans to irrigate other expanses of lawn within the Gateway, every effort should be made to use grey water rather than potable water for irrigation.