

American Planning Association – RI Chapter  
Award Nomination Essay for Michael Rauh:  
Submitted by the Washington County Regional Planning Council

Washington County, Rhode Island is a largely undeveloped region with communities ranging from rural farming enclaves to destination beach communities, punctuated by classic New England village centers and vast swaths of open space. However the past twenty years have witnessed a dramatic growth spurt for this area, and the very qualities that define the character of this region and make it unique in southern New England appeared to be in jeopardy. In response to the increase in pressure of development, the Washington County Regional Planning Council was created through the unique and unwavering vision and dedication of Mr. Michael Rauh.

Between 1980 and 2000, the population of Washington County consistently grew at a rate three times that of the rest of the state, marking a trend of migration from the urban areas into previously rural communities. Residential development had boomed, and farms and open space had been and continue to be cleared for subdivisions and “big box” development. Faced with increasing impacts from such rapid and unplanned development, the Washington County Regional Planning Council (WCRPC) was founded as a partnership organization in 1992. Michael Rauh was aware that nine different towns were struggling separately to deal with important issues that might be better addressed collectively, from a regional perspective. Mr. Rauh envisioned an organization that could aid these nine distinct towns coordinate their efforts and create a unified vision and planning process for Washington County.

Mr. Rauh established a forum where interested representatives from each of the nine towns could share their ideas and concerns, and begin to address the growing common concerns facing their communities. It was in these forums where the first dialogue among these town representatives occurred, and they would later lead to the defining vision of the Washington County Regional Planning Council. In its earliest inception, the WCRPC began as this group of representatives working through the common problems in Washington County, while Mr. Rauh facilitated all meetings and encouraged the group to continue its forward momentum. Mr. Rauh offered the Washington Trust Company as the meeting location, and the bank continued to offer generous financial support, office space and supplies. Mr. Rauh also had the vision to recognize that local town councils were the best vehicle for creating this new organization, and recommended that a member of each town council should sit on the new WCRPC board. He continued facilitating the group that he created, and to this day attends virtually all meetings, even after the WCRPC has grown into an influential organization with its own staff. Mr. Rauh’s vision has blossomed, with his guidance, into an organization that is now a major player in Rhode Island issues. Today the WCRPC works to ensure that the necessary coordination is in place to more efficiently and effectively manage growth and protect countywide resources.

Three years ago the Council (with Mr. Rauh’s constant prodding toward a “big picture” view) developed its vision for the future of the county in “Vision 2020.” This vision outlined common goals for the future among the towns and concentrated on the five agenda items of the Council: Transportation, Water Use, Economic Growth, Land

Use and Housing. In the 1990's the WCRPC promoted legislation that has brought millions of dollars from the State Realty Stamp Tax directly back to the communities of the state. The communities of Washington County urged passage to use the money for open space/recreation—which is what they have used it for. The WCRPC added staffing two years ago as a result of a capacity building grant from the Rhode Island Foundation (which Mr. Rauh wrote) and has been actively pursuing its agenda ever since. In cooperation with DEM, the WCRPC completed a Greenspace identification and mapping project that included all open space lands and “special” places in the county. To complement that, and to facilitate better planning, the WCRPC and Grow Smart Rhode Island cooperated in a Sustainable Economy Project designed to eliminate potential conflicts with land use/zoning relative to open space preservation and to identify issues surrounding the successful promotion of economic development in the region. The WCRPC is partnering with Statewide Planning in a project to plan for impacts relating to extension of a commuter rail into Washington County. In addition, the WCRPC is working with the Community Development Consortium in developing a regional GIS capacity possibly to be located in the Environmental Data Center at the University of Rhode Island. This will be an invaluable tool in the ability of communities to plan on the larger scale. Currently, the WCRPC is developing a Washington County affordable housing initiative to address the need for a more affordable mix of housing in Washington County and two adjacent towns. This housing initiative will lead to the creation of both individual affordable housing plans for each participating municipality, in addition to a regional affordable housing plan for Washington County.

Today the WCRPC is the only organization in Rhode Island that works specifically with a municipal government partnership to address regional challenges collectively. It is widely regarded as a vital organization for Washington County and its role in the state continues to grow. While the organization has implemented major projects in each of its focus areas, it began humbly, through the vision and dedication of Michael Rauh. It is with great gratitude and pride, the WCRPC now has the opportunity to help honor the man who initiated it, made all of its great work possible, unwaveringly encouraged its members to go forward on projects to enrich life in Washington County, and continues to provide necessary inspiration and advice.