

Environment can aid economy, panel says

By **Laura Ricketson**
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There are ways to preserve Rhode Island's "quality of place," as well as boost its economy with 20,000 new jobs, according to experts who spoke at a recent panel that brought together environmentalists and businesspeople.

"There's no reason why we have to sacrifice the environment or job growth to get the job done," said Michael McMahon, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation.

Environmentalists and businesspeople gathered July 17 at the Westin Hotel for a panel and meeting of the minds, sponsored by Grow Smart Rhode Island and the Environmental Business Council of New England. The focus of the discussion: to find a way to balance economic growth with environmental conservation and preservation.

More than 50 businesspeople, educators, town officials, environmentalists and environmental engineers attended, and lent their ideas, suggestions and concerns to the panel: Jan Reitsma, director of the state Department of Environmental Management; Grover Fugate, director of the state Coastal Resources Management Council; and McMahon.

Despite the diverse crowd, one group was missing: state legislators. Only Rep. Matthew McHugh, a South Kingstown Democrat, attended the discussion, even though General Assembly members were notified of the event, as was pointed out by one town official.

According to McMahon, 16,000 of those new jobs will come

from existing companies, and the state needs to focus on knowledge-based jobs. The state is trying to attract and build more environmentally friendly industries, as well as make the process of cleaning up polluted sites - known as brownfields - easier for companies, he said.

McMahon added that the state is trying to have the steel turbines for Cape Cod's proposed wind farm assembled at Quonset, and he's campaigning for an oil company to test out a hydrogen car here.

"We need smart growth," McMahon said, adding that the state can't afford to take low-level, low-skill and low-paying jobs just for the sake of employment. "Montana has a higher state revenue in the marine business than Rhode Island. Most of the good ideas are on the shelf somewhere. Let's take the best ideas and make them happen."

McMahon said fish farming is not an option - it would tax the state's resources too much. One viable option that the state is examining, however, is development of drugs using marine organisms, he said. The EDC is also working with the DEM on ways to streamline the permitting process for businesses.

Rhode Island must be transformed into a place where companies want to be, McMahon said, and sites need to be "business ready," to make it even more convenient for new business to relocate here and for existing business to expand. Public and private partnerships can play an important role in this, he said.

"We're invested in making it easier to work with the state DEM," Reitsma said. "We want to be more proactive versus reactive. If it's true that the environmental agency is a

critical part of economic development, we need to put our money where our mouth is."

DEM is working hard to plan for growth, Reitsma said, and that includes a growth center policy that would identify places where growth should and can occur. Municipalities must welcome that growth, he said. Reitsma echoed McMahon's sentiments on industry, including what might fit at Quonset.

The natural resources industry would be efficient and prosperous at Quonset, he said, including fishing, agriculture and tourism-based business. One possibility is a fish-processing plant, he said.

"Our strategy is not to suck people from other parts of the state, but if they want to move there," the EDC would also encourage that, McMahon said. A mixed-use, industrial research park is still the state's plan for Quonset. The key, he said, is to make it more presentable to new business, make it a place they want to be.

"From a coastal zone management perspective, Rhode Island is unique," said Fugate. "We are the last bastion of undeveloped shore." Fugate agreed that the marine industry also holds promise, such



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as aquaculture for biotechnology. Rhode Island also has the ability to utilize small-scale agriculture. Fugate reported that the CRMC and DEM are working on new coastal zone management regulations that will allow more access to and development of some coastal areas, such as the Providence River.

Providence is having problems developing the waterfront, said Fugate, and the CRMC is working to make the permitting process easier and devise more "sensible" regulations on a case-by-case basis.