A Smithfield state of mind

Study commissioned by Planning Department may radically change how we see ourselves as a community

By Laurence J. Sasso, Jr.

Major changes in how Smithfield relates to the rest of the world both economically and demographically could be just over the horizon.

A study of the town by a consulting group called New Commons has analyzed the community and come up with some eye-opening conclusions. The organization, which characterizes itself as "a think and do tank," conducted focus groups over a period of time, studied the historical and cultural origins of the area, reviewed planning and economic development data and documents, and arrived at a perspective that challenges a good deal of the current thinking about what makes Smithfield Smithfield.

Intriguingly, at the same time it looks to the future the research connects the fate of the town directly to its origins almost three centuries ago when the area was a collection of small villages and pastoral vistas.

According to Fred Presley, the director of planning and economic development, the study will be presented to the Town Council this month. It has the potential to radically change how the community sees itself and how it presents itself to the rest of the state, the region, and the world.

It may also lead to significant changes in the zoning regulations and the Comprehensive Community Plan, and it could make Smithfield a leader among Rhode Island cities and towns in the way it approaches economic development.

"We're going to be a major player on the state level," declares Mr. Presley when discussing the study which his department contracted for last March.

"I started the process when I began working with the Economic Development Commission," he said. "We call it Place Making in Smithfield."

A paper compiled by New Commons summarizing the study has the working title "Smithfield: A World Within Itself."

"The Economic Development Commission was planning to market the town, and I asked them 'what are we marketing and to whom,'" the planning director recounts.

He had worked with New Commons in his previous job as an environmental planner at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and knew that they used what he terms a "unique methodology that brought together diverse stakeholders."

"I thought it would be a worthwhile process for Smithfield to go through before we began marketing the town. The Northeast doesn't have the economics to compete with the South and Southwest, Mr. Presley points out.

"We are more about information and finance; we are about creating an environment of innovation. We need to discover what makes Smithfield unique. It's only going to be so many Fidelity Investments. We had to learn what else it is we want to create and how to attract the kind of business we want to attract."

To do that it was necessary to take a good hard look at the community and determine just what Smithfield is really like, not what promoters and advocates of the town want and hope it to be, even more to the point, try to package it to be.

"Planning used to be: 'in 20 years we're going to be here.' It never works that way," comments Mr. Presley. "Instead you define who you are and position yourself and say 'here we are.'"

This is where New Commons comes in. The consulting firm proceeded in its examination of Smithfield with the
operating principle that economic development doesn’t happen in isolation from the factors that structure a place, i.e. the elements that define it.

Basically New Commons believes there are six such elements that go into defining a sense of place. They call them: the built environment, the social environment, the cultural environment, the economic environment, the ecological environment, and the knowledge environment. The research New Commons undertook in Smithfield analyzed each of these aspects of the town.

What emerged is fascinating to Mr. Presley as well as to the economic development people who have been involved, he says. Those in the community who have participated in the various focus group meetings that have been part of the process have also been enthusiastic.

"After the first meeting we looked at each other and said ‘where the heck are we going with this.’ After the last meeting we were saying ‘woah, isn’t this great,’” Mr. Presley reports.

"People started out thinking about the box. I said forget about the box," he continues.

The gist of what they all found so exciting when they did

"What came out of [the study] was the fact that residents loved the rural character, the history, and the villages."

...go outside the conventional approach is the somewhat surprising conclusion that Smithfield is not a town... at least not in the usual sense that a town is defined by its legal geographical boundaries.

New Commons, instead, views Smithfield as “a larger region that contains five distinct villages or sub-locales that, over time, have tended to emerge organically.”

A summary of the group’s report goes on to note that “without an explicit geographic center, the Smithfield Region is bound together by large transportation infrastructure, a common tax base, the Woonaquatuck Bucket watershed, and common municipal governance.”

Lacking a true center like those seen in many old New England towns, Smithfield developed along the lines of the waterways that powered the old textile mills. The different villages each presented their own unique identity within the larger framework of the community.

“What came out of [the study],” observes Fred Presley, “was the fact that residents loved the rural character, the history, and the villages. In fact, the villages came out as the strongest element in the whole thing.”

What might seem like a great irony to long time Smithfield folk, is that since the 1950s there have been a number of conscious efforts from groups both inside town government and out to de-emphasize the sectional differences here. Sporadically there have been efforts to characterize the community as one inclusive entity where the role of the villages is downplayed or outright denied.

Now it seems that based on the input from the study’s focus groups and from the analysis of what gives Smithfield its defining character the village identities are what should be strengthened and used as the building blocks for future efforts to market the town.

Perhaps even more controversial is that in New Commons’ overview the villages or sub-locales don’t stop at the town lines. For example one of the five areas is described as Greenville-North, Johnston-Harmony. Another is called Esmond-Georgiaville, Greystone-Centredale.

The study revealed, for example, that “as the name implies, the Esmond-Georgiaville, Greystone-Centredale area moves beyond the boundary of Smithfield toward Providence. Culturally and economically it looks more to the South and the East than it does toward Greenville.”

Similarly, says the summary “The Greenville-North, Johnston-Harmony area is the geographic and service center for Smithfield. Greenville possesses a strong sense of place. Culturally it views itself as the center of the Smithfield region, as do people from outside Smithfield, even if it is not.”

The report offers the same kind of analyses for each of the five sub-locales and suggests detailed “opportunities” for the town to take maximum advantage of the existing components and elements that give them their distinct characteristics.

For example, regarding the Greenville-North, Johnston-Har-
Renee Palazzo new assistant principal at SHS

On Tuesday, January 16, 2007, Renee Palazzo was named the new assistant principal at Smithfield High School. She joins the administrative team of Principal Daniel Kelley and Assistant Principal Alan Tenreiro. Mrs. Palazzo replaces Dennis Kafalas who left SHS to take over as principal at Ponaganset High School last November.

Mrs. Palazzo earned her BA in secondary math from Rhode Island College and her Masters of Education from the University of New England. She has been employed as a mathematics teacher in the Smithfield School Department since 1996.

"I am very excited to have Renee join our administrative team," said Daniel Kelley, principal of Smithfield High School. "She has NEASC experience, an understanding of the new diploma system, and is a respected member of the staff. I look forward to working with her to continue to build on the strong traditions of Smithfield High School."

Mrs. Palazzo lives in Glocester with her husband Joe, her son Joseph, and her daughter Isabella.

A Smithfield state of mind

Continued from page 5

mony area, the study comments, "G-NJ-H needs a 'downtown village mission' if it is to retain the historic sense of place [and] character of Old Greenville. It will need a public-private partnership that includes economic benefactors and community champions to achieve this. Such an effort could begin with design reviews and signage guidelines. . . . Economically it should focus on small businesses and franchises to help build wealth, rather than filling in with national chains that only offer service-wage jobs."

There are similar examinations of each section of the community by New Commons and each is accompanied by recommendations for capitalizing on the unique features of the sub-locale.

"The study promotes the type of growth we want to see and that is sustainable," remarks Mr. Presley, who adds that by taking this holistic view of the town the economic planning process can proceed based on a rational profile of Smithfield's true component parts. Rather than seeking to attract businesses that might prove to be short term guests, the town can sell itself as a long term home to enterprises that want to be here, based on the overview of the town they have seen in the study.

Marketing the concepts of the village model (mixed business and residential use) and the logical development of businesses compatible with the existing social, cultural and natural environments will afford the best opportunity for sustained, desirable expansion of the tax base, Presley believes.

He says that by encouraging entrepreneurs to come here who find the attributes of Smithfield compatible with their goals the town stands a much better chance of having them grow their businesses here and stay here. He also wants to assist already existing businesses in developing into stronger, bigger endeavors.

In taking this perspective he notes that "Bryant University is a huge asset." The university and Fidelity are major contributors to the environment of innovation that he mentions above.

Because the ideal model for future economic development flies in the face of much of the previously accepted wisdom on zoning, it will be necessary to make some serious changes to the ordinances. In the past it seemed best to separate the places where you lived from the places where you shopped or manufactured goods. So, like most communities, Smithfield has zoning regulations that prohibit stores in residential zones or homes in office or corporate areas.

If the Council agrees, the zoning ordinances could soon be redrawn in some parts of the town to allow for developments that approximate the old village centers of a century ago, with homes and offices and shops mixed together in pleasing arrangements that promote a more cohesive sense of community. Clearly, there are numerous other considerations to take into account, such as traffic, parking, landscaping, lighting, signage and the like. Affordable housing for people of varying ages figures prominently into the equation as well.

"We're actually moving to change the zoning and change the affordable housing plan at the same time," points out Mr. Presley. He predicts that this will occur in the next three to six months. "I think we have to be aggressive with this," he declares. He also called the study the "precursor to the next comprehensive [community] plan. The next comprehensive plan is going to be a completely different animal, he predicts."

The conclusion of the New Commons study summary states, "Smithfield must be able to tell its own story. If it is to sell itself within the Boston-New York region it is critical that Smithfield can explain what it is and how it relates to the larger region."

You might say that the town has been about the business of doing just that since the days of such founders as Resolved Waterman and John Appleby, movers and shakers back when the original villages of Smithfield were being established in colonial times before the town was incorporated in 1731.

Now 276 years later this new research is suggesting the work they started is far from done. Those original leaders might take satisfaction if they knew that the future of the community is still being shaped by what they began. In fact, it appears that their work is more important than ever.