

## **KeepSpace: an integrated approach to building better homes and communities Special Achievement**

### **Introduction**

Rhode Island Housing has always believed that a ‘home is more than four walls and a roof.’ In 2007 we launched an innovative new program with this belief at its very core. We recognize that the factors that have led to our state and country’s current challenges underscore the need for collaborative, holistic community development as a sustainable economic driver. We can no longer look at homes or the environment in a vacuum, nor can we view communities as one small area, confined by invisible borders. Good homes require good jobs nearby. A 21<sup>st</sup> century community can only thrive if it considers how it connects to and interacts with its neighbors and key metro and regional centers. And a clean, healthy environment should be part of the planning process, rather than an afterthought.

In launching KeepSpace in 2007, we knew we were onto something big. For the very first time, we were bringing together partners of greatly varied interests to change the way Rhode Island thinks about and pursues development. Since then, the KeepSpace philosophy of innovation, collaboration and cooperation is being put into practice throughout Rhode Island, from the agency level to those on the ground. Now, as our KeepSpace Communities and developments move ahead, we are seeing the amazing results that arise from these partnerships.

### **Challenges**

Rhode Island, like many states, is struggling to provide quality affordable homes for residents who have been hit hard by the weak economy and high unemployment. With a mission of providing safe, affordable homes to all residents of our state, the KeepSpace initiative has been critical in helping us to develop homes that are truly part of their communities, and benefit from the many factors that provide a positive environment for individuals and families. The challenges to this vision are many—the ever-increasing gap between what people earn and what they pay for rent/mortgages, a deep recession, housing market in disarray, and municipalities struggling to provide the infrastructure and amenities their residents require.

As the smallest state in the nation, and with the Atlantic Ocean as our eastern border, we also have little room for growth or expansion, and the open and natural space we have is under ever-increasing pressure for development. Regulatory barriers like zoning requirements that require large lots or prohibit a mix of residential and commercial uses, and often long and sometimes contradictory permitting and approval processes at the state and local level can make ‘smart growth’ almost impossible. To make matters worse, the development process itself is almost designed to be confrontational with developers trying to maximize the use of the land, residents opposing the loss of open space to development, and state agencies, focusing on their specific issues of concern like environmental protection or the creation of affordable homes, often at odds with one another. ***The challenge becomes how to develop sustainable and thriving communities, with mixed-income development, that retains our communities’ unique sense of place while providing a variety of housing options.***

### **Unprecedented Partnerships**

In response to these challenges, Rhode Island Housing created a multi-disciplinary partnership with state agencies, non-profits and other community-based organizations from throughout the state to work together to create living, breathing, growing places where neighbors meet, people work, and children play. The type of development that KeepSpace promotes used to happen naturally, but now, communities and developers need help to overcome the hurdles that make this sort of development pattern difficult to achieve today. For our state’s economy to be strong and healthy, we must develop innovative solutions to meet our housing, environmental and workforce needs. KeepSpace offers an integrated long-term solution to these problems.

Instead of working independently of each other to create small pockets of success in each area, the partners work *together* to create neighborhoods where a healthy environment is as valued as safe homes and good jobs.

The underlying goal and philosophy of KeepSpace is to create viable and sustainable communities by bringing together all concerned – the community, developers, and state and local regulatory agencies – in a collaborative process to develop a shared vision for the community that embraces the six KeepSpace elements, and work together to implement it. Through these unique partnerships, KeepSpace *combines* expertise and complements existing resources and initiatives, rather than working separately on isolated parts of land and community development and preservation. The result: strong, healthy, prosperous communities that use integrated solutions to many of the development and environmental challenges facing Rhode Islanders and the state.

At the heart of the initiative is the KeepSpace Advisory Committee, a diverse group of non-profit housing, smart growth and environmental protection organizations, and state officials responsible for housing, economic development, environmental protection, planning, transportation and health issues that brings together the expertise, experience and program/ funding resources needed to make KeepSpace Communities possible. The collaborative nature of the program allows participants to apply their collective experience and expertise to a specific initiative. This kind of collaboration, streamlining of processes and exchange of ideas is what makes KeepSpace unique.

### **Local Needs, National Model**

With universally tighter budgets, constrained funding, and much higher stakes than ever before, this alternative integrated approach is more important than ever. Issues like sprawl, unemployment, global warming, the lack of affordable homes, and environmental and economic decline have whet America's appetite for communities that are sustainable. Applying the KeepSpace Principles to communities, developments and activities across Rhode Island is a major step in facilitating long-term positive change, to make our state, the region and our country a better, safer, and more affordable place to live.

As more partners join together, we are sharing critical information across inter-disciplinary boundaries. Meanwhile, Rhode Island Housing and other agencies are seeking and securing funding sources and targeting and pooling resources for better outcomes in every area. Particularly energizing is the promise of the upcoming opportunities for federal funding. The national Sustainable Communities partnership proposes to make grants available to help communities establish a vision for sustainable growth – a process that KeepSpace began almost three years ago.

It is both refreshing and reassuring to us to know that the Obama administration's philosophy and mission parallel those of KeepSpace. Knowing that HUD, EPA and DOT are working together, pledging to ensure that housing and transportation goals are met while protecting the environment, further reaffirms the goals we set out to achieve when we launched KeepSpace. By its very nature, KeepSpace is about changing the way we do things – working together as partners instead of pursuing interests independently. Partnerships are an integral part of the KeepSpace mission: to work together toward creating integrated, healthy, sustainable, 'whole' communities - for a better Rhode Island now and into the future. Alignment with the Federal Sustainable Communities Initiative important as provides potential funding streams and support for the initiative.

### **Working Together**

In 2009, the KeepSpace Initiative began working at the community level in four pilot communities, engaging residents, stakeholder groups, businesses, non-profit agencies and members of our Advisory Committee in KeepSpace Working Groups. These Working Groups were charged with identifying issues, challenges, barriers, successes, and opportunities in each community and developing strategies in support of the creation of the six KeepSpace Elements: **A Good Home, A Healthy Environment, Strong Commerce, Sensible Infrastructure, Positive Community Impact, and Integrated Arts, Recreation, Culture and Religion.** Working Group members receive support from the KeepSpace Advisory Committee and staff from Rhode Island Housing and our agency partners.

## Results to Date

As we now see the KeepSpace philosophy in practice in the first four KeepSpace Communities we are already experiencing results. Community Working Groups are working with agencies and cities and towns to make groundbreaking progress. While we have achieved numerous outcomes to date, within the last year we have experienced a number of successes, including:

- Further cultivation of partnerships at all levels, cutting across traditional program lines, agencies and municipalities;
- First groundbreaking in a KeepSpace Community: Blackstone Valley Gateways (*see attached program booklet and press release*);
- Visits from HUD Deputy Secretary Ronald C. Sims and members of the Regional Sustainable Partnership illustrate both the alignment of KeepSpace with federal Sustainable Communities Initiative, but also interest national model has in learning about success to date of KeepSpace (*see attached media coverage*);
- Development of key strategies for each community through efforts of Working Groups (*see attached strategies for Pawtucket/Central Falls KeepSpace Community*);
- Creation of community gardens within KeepSpace Community where people of all ages can gather, work, and play while producing healthy, locally grown foods. One community garden is unique partnership between a local PHA and non-profit garden group to provide healthy, sustainable food to PHA residents and their children.
- The RI Department of Environmental Management (DEM) has developed a streamlined review process for projects in KeepSpace Communities. All permit or funding applications to DEM from KeepSpace Communities will be coordinated through a single point of contact to ensure that these efforts are coordinated and work together to achieve the shared vision for the community. Already their status as KeepSpace Communities has contributed to two of our pilot communities receiving brownfield remediation grants from DEM.
- KeepSpace has played an integral role in numerous conferences and educational/outreach activities as part of our educational and outreach goals for KeepSpace;
- Rhode Island Housing has committed to prioritization of development initiatives aligned with KeepSpace principles;
- Designation of statewide planning challenge grant to Pawtucket/Central Falls KeepSpace Community for transportation study;
- Launch of re-designed KeepSpace website ([www.KeepSpace.org](http://www.KeepSpace.org));
- KeepSpace was chosen for the “Award for Outstanding Comprehensive Planning Project” by the Rhode Chapter of the American Planning Association (RI APA). The award celebrated the KeepSpace goals of creating viable and sustainable neighborhoods through collaboration and partnerships among all the stakeholders, and commended KeepSpace for promoting positive community development and housing choices throughout Rhode Island.