



**Testimony by Scott Wolf, Executive Director,
Grow Smart Rhode Island,
in Opposition to the Proposed Dowling Village
Retail and Entertainment Center
along the North Smithfield / Woonsocket Border**

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Good evening Mr. Chairman and members of the North Smithfield Planning Board. My name is Scott Wolf, and I am the Executive Director of Grow Smart Rhode Island. Grow Smart represents a broad coalition of organizations from the private, public and non-profit sectors that are fighting suburban sprawl and urban decay by advocating equitable, efficient and environmentally friendly economic development.

We are strong proponents of economic growth and of increasing the ability of municipalities to finance such vital services as public education. That's why we have fought hard to establish and protect the State Historic Preservation Investment Tax Credit, new incentives for Brownfield redevelopment and a state building rehab code that recognizes the special challenges involved in renovating our older building stock.

Grow Smart believes, however, that economic development activities should add sustainable and resilient jobs to Rhode Island's total job pool rather than simply redistributing existing jobs from one place to another. Grow Smart also believes that economic development projects should be evaluated not only for their job creation value but also for their potential impacts on statewide industrial and commercial vitality, on the environment, and on the quality of life for the community.

While the evidence you will consider this evening may pertain specifically to the extension of an already-approved Master Plan, Grow Smart thinks it is important to take this opportunity to consider the impact of decisions like this one on the quality of life and economic vibrancy of Northern Rhode Island and the state as a whole. By providing our views on the Dowling Village project, we hope to encourage you and other local and statewide leaders to pursue economic and community development policies that safeguard and enhance Rhode Island's unique character, a character that is shaped by our historic cities, towns and villages and by our farms, forests and open spaces. It is this very character, after all, that has helped drive our state's new found appeal to local and out-of-state investors.

Grow Smart's concerns about the Dowling Village proposal focus around the following four issues:

- Flaws in the State MED zone law
- The apparent inconsistency in state law regarding Woonsocket's ability to designate the proposed site as a MED zone
- The negative impact that such a large-scale, auto-dependent retail development could have on the promising efforts to revitalize Woonsocket's central business district
- The growing pressure on municipalities to embrace "quick fix" revenue solutions because of state government's delay in addressing the long term need for property tax reform.

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Now I want to elaborate on each of these concerns, beginning with flaws in the Med Zone law.

1. Grow Smart believes the MED Zone law (Chapter 45-18-30.C) was poorly written and is therefore subject to multiple interpretations. However, based on the findings of fact listed in the statute, it is our opinion that lawmakers didn't intend for the statute to apply to developments such as the one proposed here, but rather to serve as a tool for revitalizing struggling urban and town centers that are beset by deteriorated, blighted conditions. The site of the proposed shopping center is currently undeveloped land considerably removed from Woonsocket's central business district. We believe the application of the Med Zone designation as proposed actually works against the principles of renovation and revitalization of existing urban and town centers—and of the businesses located within these centers-- in favor of creating new large-scale retail developments on the outskirts of our municipalities.
2. We agree with the position that the MED Zone proposed for the Woonsocket portion of the Dowling Village project conflicts with a state policy discouraging the use of public subsidies outside of blighted areas targeted for redevelopment. The problem is that position conflicts with a state statute (Chapter 45-31) which defines potential redevelopment areas as including those that are hampered by physical conditions such as poor soils or ledge. In the final analysis however, Grow Smart believes the MED Zone statute was intended for “deteriorated blighted areas” which are those where there exist buildings or other structures in need of repair, restoration or revitalization, etc.
3. In general, Grow Smart is deeply concerned about the short and long term consequences for Rhode Island's existing urban and town centers of the conventional and heavily auto-dependent brand of big box development - particularly those developments that take place on large tracts of undeveloped land far removed from walkable central business districts. In the case of the Dowling Village proposal, Grow Smart is concerned about its potential negative impact on existing small businesses as well as on the revitalization of Woonsocket's Main Street, which has struggled, but seems to be moving in the right direction.

In raising these concerns, we want to add that we understand that the nature of retailing is changing in the United States. We are also aware of new trends in which national retailers are finding mutual success with municipalities by locating in older, established urban centers. We think this makes sense and we believe it starts with communities establishing the standards for the size and type of retail developments that are consistent with a community's character and existing businesses.

4. Finally, we believe that our commentary on this proposal is a good opportunity to highlight the need to reduce both Rhode Island's reliance on the local property tax and the pressure this reliance generates on local officials to pursue questionable development proposals that promise a big, quick revenue return.

So, what DO we recommend? If the full plan before you is ultimately not approved, we believe there are viable, more attractive alternatives to ensure that this property can effectively contribute to expanding the local tax base. Perhaps the answer is no further than your own Comprehensive Plan of 1995. Specifically, we would encourage town leaders to consider the benefits of an appropriately scaled mixed-use development consisting of professional offices, light industry and multi-family housing that was originally envisioned in North Smithfield's 1995 Comprehensive Plan.

This vision may dovetail with the current concerns and plans of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (EDC). It has been reported, for example, that the (EDC) has identified a lack of good industrial and office space throughout the state as a major roadblock to accommodating the growth of quality jobs by existing and new businesses. According to the EDC, this shortage of space is particularly acute in Northern Rhode Island and has been an impediment to growing Rhode Island's economy and municipal tax base.

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We understand that EDC is eager to work with more communities to determine where they would like to see growth occur and then to collaborate on preparing “pad-ready” sites that can be marketed and promoted to the most attractive and sought after industries.

As an example, we understand the EDC is actively working with four Rhode Island biotech companies seeking to expand as they move from the discovery phase of development to advanced clinical trials. In fact EDC is proposing that the state support the construction of a 100,000 square foot biopharmaceutical facility in Northern Rhode Island that would employ between 250 – 400 people.

Grow Smart believes that this type of less auto intensive, commercial/ industrial project, co-located with some residential development, would be a far more sensible way to expand the town’s tax base with far less negative collateral consequences. With convenient access to Route 146, this site presents an opportunity for you as town leaders to effectively balance economic growth with the protection of your quality of life.

Consequently, we encourage you and other town leaders to oppose the existing Dowling Village development proposal and to collaborate with state economic development officials to pursue an alternate development vision that will provide significant and sustainable benefits for all North Smithfield citizens as well as residents of neighboring communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Grow Smart Rhode Island’s views with you. I would be happy to take any questions at this time.

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Grow Smart Rhode Island is a statewide public interest group representing a broad coalition of partners fighting sprawl and urban decay by promoting innovative policies and programs to revitalize urban, town and village centers; Preserve cultural and natural resources; and Expand economic opportunity for all Rhode Islanders