

Town Study Showed Threefold Savings

The Challenge

The last, vast forested area along the Interstate 95 corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C. sits amid the borderlands of Connecticut and southern Rhode Island. Within this 200 square mile region lays West Greenwich, RI, a small, rural town split roughly down its geographic center by I-95.

West Greenwich was speeding toward a crossroads a decade ago. Almost everyone in town—from the landowners to the select board—recognized the impact changing commuting and growth patterns would bring to a place where land could still be had at bargain prices. Growth was in the future, but the question of how much growth and at what cost had yet to be settled.

The Solution

In 1995, the Northeastern Area provided a grant to the Southern New England Forest Consortium, Inc. to study the cost of community services in sample towns in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. West Greenwich was one of the Rhode Island towns selected for study.

“We’re property rights people here,” stressed Kevin Breene, West Greenwich Town Administrator. Still, he explained, for its social, economic, and environmental future, West Greenwich had to balance its growth with its heritage of rural character.

The results of the study provided West Greenwich with some of its earliest data on costs to the town associated with growth. The results helped inform the discussion of the town leadership and dispel some myths associated with development.

For West Greenwich (1995), the ratio of town expenses to tax revenue was:

- \$1.46 per acre for residential use
- \$0.40 per acre for industrial use
- \$0.46 per acre for open space

West Greenwich knows that maintaining rural character and keeping municipal costs down go hand in hand.



Many partners are working together for the conservation of these 1,600 acres of important forests in Rhode Island. (photo by Kevin Essington, The Nature Conservancy)

Resulting Benefits

The study added to the understanding the town leadership had regarding the costs and benefits of land use. It showed better than a three to one ratio between community services costs associated with residential development versus costs per acre of open space.

The data helped Breene and members of the select board chart the town’s future. Along with surveys of residents and other information, the town created its master plan, with an emphasis on balancing the pace of development with conservation of open space and rural character.

Sharing Success

The Cost of Community Services study was an early directional cue, but the heavy lifting was still ahead. West Greenwich progressed toward an unprecedented success a decade later. In April 2006, an \$8M bond issue was put before the community to fund the town’s portion of a joint effort to conserve 1648 acres of open space within its borders.

Three large, contiguous parcels under separate ownership made up the 1648 acres. With its master plan as the guide—and a citizenry well versed in the costs and benefits of various land uses—the community voted 632 to 12 in favor of the bond. The town, the West Greenwich Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the US Forest Service, and other partners are pooling resources for the \$24M needed to conserve the land.

The tax increase resulting from the bond was \$75 per year per taxpayer on average. The tax increase associated with a 168 unit home development proposed for part of the site would have been many times more.



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