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## **Creating a new vision for rural R.I.**

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A Rhode Island town without a central village, coupled with a Connecticut town with too many village centers, will function as the fulcrum for a pilot project that seeks to change the way planners look at their towns individually and within the region.

The Borderlands Project announced last week that Exeter, R.I., and Killingly, Conn., have been chosen for the Village Innovation Pilot, an 18-month, \$200,000 venture to study the towns' layouts, village centers, regional impact and potential for success as ambassadors to their cross-border neighbors.

The two towns will work with architects, designers and state planners under the guidance of the Nature Conservancy, the R.I. Economic Policy Council and The Orton Family Foundation, said Nature Conservancy Project Director Kevin Essington. When the pilot ends in mid-2009, the two towns should have identified their village centers, put plans – including zoning changes – in place toward realizing their visions and have started “significant groundwork” on them.

Exeter was chosen because much of the western half is eclipsed by the Arcadia Wildlife Management Area, while the eastern half – once mostly rural – is at risk of suburban sprawl.

“Of the four towns in Rhode Island that applied, they seemed to demonstrate the most that they had a balanced approach to what they wanted to do in their community,” Essington said. “It was very important for us that this be a conservation and economic development study.”

Exeter Town Planner David Schweid said the project should act as a way to better direct growth, rather than attempt to curb residential or commercial growth in what has become, during the past 30 years, a bedroom community for Providence. “It is, like the rest of South County, under some very significant development pressures,” he said.

Both Route 2 and Interstate 95 cut through Exeter. Residential growth continues to be strong in the east, but the town doesn't have a decisive plan for commercial growth; a village center – one of the main goals of the pilot – would be an important step toward that end, Schweid said. Such a center, through zoning changes, could be put into place along Route 102, the town's major east-west thoroughfare.

“This has been talked about in Exeter for many years,” he said. “Probably close to 15 years. This is especially great for us, because we don't have a lot of staff – I'm part-time, two days a week – and we don't have a lot of money.”

The Village Innovation Pilot seeks controlled planning. Phase One will be a discussion about town culture, rather than a planning brainstorm.

The Orton Family Foundation, a Vermont-based nonprofit investing \$50,000 in the project, pushed for implementation of Phase One – called “Heart & Soul.” For the first six months, to begin during January 2008, consultants will discuss town-wide goals with community members.

“We have found over the year that communities have not gone deep enough and diversely enough into their design work. So, what happens at the stage of implementation is a lot of people who should have been, but weren’t, involved earlier come out of the woodwork,” said William Roper, president and CEO of the foundation.

Schweid said that Phase One will determine what residents see as the traits that make a town like Exeter unique to outsiders – an exercise that can aid planners in place-making decisions. “As part of that process, we’ll begin to understand the things that need to be preserved, the things that are important to the community.”

The two chosen towns are significantly different. While Killingly boasts a population of about 17,400 within 50 square miles, Exeter’s density is much lower – about 6,045 residents occupy 58.4 square miles.

Killingly has five full-time staffers in the planning department, but Exeter operates with only Schweid accompanied by a part-time clerk.

“Killingly also has much more development, they have different villages in the town, so it’s a lot more complicated in that way,” Essington said. The two main village centers are in the boroughs of Danielson and Dayville, which are only about four miles apart and slowly leaking toward each other.

Director of Planning and Development Linda Walden said Killingly’s proposal is to look at the interaction of those village centers, including a 500,000-square-foot development that’s started in Danielson.

“We want to keep both of the centers unique. Yet both are to become the growth centers of the town, giving us the opportunity to conserve property out to the east,” she said.

Phase One of the Village Innovation Pilot will be followed by two others, each to take six months, to continue research and develop recommendations, leading to a final implementation phase. Phase Three, though, won’t likely involve a completion of the village center. The process of building a cohesive center to any town is a years-long process, so the towns will continue after the pilot toward the designs created in the first two phases.

The Borderlands Project, first announced in 2003, is the result of policy discussions concerning the border region between Rhode Island and Connecticut. Policymakers identified the two most pressing concerns of the 20 border towns: a consistent understaffing and the absence of a growth-oriented village center, Essington said.

This pilot program also seeks more in-depth discussion between towns across the state border.

“We will have a report at the end about what lessons we’ve learned from each community, and what lessons apply to the larger region,” said Ariana McBride, economic development planner for the R.I. Economic Policy Council. But, because this study is a pilot, there could

be further interesting outcomes, including identification of specific policies – local, state and regional – that should be changed.

With conservation land so important for the 20 towns that make up the border between Connecticut and Rhode Island – with areas such as the Moosup River Watershed, Arcadia Wildlife Management Area and Queens River – further development in both Exeter and Killingly also has a potential to irk residents interested in preserving green space. Phase One of the pilot is set up to curb those concerns.

“It’s a tricky question. Can we support development while supporting conservation? That’s the question we have before us,” Essington said. •