

Panel hunts down conflicts in R.I. codes

RIBA representative asks members to report inconsistencies they have encountered in building, fire codes.

By Paul F. Eno *Editor*

Have you run up against inconsistencies in various codes in your day-to-day work? Now's the time to speak up!

That's the word from Eric J. Wishart of Civil CADD Services Inc., who represents the Rhode

Island Builders Association on the new Code Consistency Council (CCC), authorized by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 2013. The purpose of the CCC is to review the state's codes, including building, fire, environmental, mechanical, and even elevator, for conflicts.



Eric Wishart

"We won't be the ones to resolve the conflicts, but our task is to identify the conflicts and make

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FEATURED PRODUCTS AND SERVICES FOR MARCH

Centerspread

PWB wins big at IBS 2014

As we went to press in February, the Rhode Island Builders Association's Professional Women in Building Council was walking away from the International Builders Show in Las Vegas with six national awards. Watch for a full report in the April *Rhode Island Builder Report*.

JLC LIVE: Members get free admission

RIBA members can get free admission to the exhibits at JLC LIVE: The Residential Construction Show (a \$35 value) when it takes place in Providence March 21st and 22nd.

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Opportunities in Warwick

See our interview with Warwick's mayor and planning staff about some big opportunities for builders and remodelers in that city.

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Free courses for members

RIBA offers free tuition for members in its many valuable courses and seminars.

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Making ourselves heard



PHOTO BY NATHAN KELLY

A group of Rhode Island Builders Association members dig into the state's regulatory climate during a recent focus group for RhodeMap RI, a planning project coordinated by the state Division of Planning. RIBA is now a key participant. The focus group took place at RIBA headquarters. Story on page 17.

A conversation with...

Mayor Scott Avedisian & Staff

On opportunities for builders in Warwick



From left, Mayor Scott Avedisian; Planning Director William J. DePasquale Jr.; Senior Planner Daniel T. Geagan; and Tourism, Culture and Development Director Karen Jedson

Warwick officials participating in this five-way interview on development opportunities in that city were Mayor Scott A. Avedisian; City Planning Director William J. DePasquale Jr.; Tourism, Culture and Development Director Karen Jedson; and Senior Planner Daniel T. Geagan.

THE BUILDER: Among Rhode Island cities and towns, where does Warwick stand when it comes to economic growth?

AVEDISIAN: Last year Warwick had about \$14.3 million in commercial construction projects. That included Balise Motors, Kent Hospital, Dollar Tree (and many others)... a diverse selection of commercial development. Sam's Club just reopened, and that was another large development.

The Planning Board has approved a Boutique Hotel in Apponaug, and the Apponaug Bypass will start later this year. We also have the airport expansion and, of course, City Centre. So virtually every sector of the local economy has seen some kind of growth. We expect a major announcement in the next month or so on the Rhode Island Mall, and Warwick Mall is one of the only malls in New England that has seen an increase in retail space. They had to add on to the building.

So Warwick has seen lots of broad-based commercial re-development.

DePASQUALE: The mayor has been out front with our development strategy. What are we good at? Who do we want to attract? What's our market? So in and around City Centre Warwick, and Metro Center, will be our new Business Innovation District. We're getting an understanding of what clusters of development will be attracted to that area.

JEDSON: We also have some of the highest hotel occupancy rates in Rhode Island, with 16 hotels and over 2,200 rooms. Last year we had a 5 percent growth in occupancy.

THE BUILDER: What is City Centre Warwick and what place does it have in your development scenario?


AVEDISIAN: City Centre Warwick is 95 acres of potential re-development all around T.F. Green Airport. The whole area of the railroad station and part of Jefferson Boulevard that includes the former Leviton complex, has been subdivided into five parcels. One will be preserved as a park, Dean Warehouse Services has taken another parcel to consolidate their operations, and three parcels will be re-developed by Michael Integlia & Company.

That's the beginning of City Centre: A multi-use, intermodal, highly pedestrian-friendly neighborhood. It will bring together plane, train, bus, car, pedestrians and even bicycles. There's proximity to Interstates 95 and 295. People will be able to move in an effective way. City Centre brings everything together.

We're also considering amenities for visitors. Ocean State Theatre is right there on Jefferson Boulevard. Salve Regina University will open a satellite campus on Metro Center Boulevard. Those are all extra, value-added amenities that will make City Centre even larger and more diverse.

DePASQUALE: City Centre also captures a market cohort that Warwick has been losing: the 20-29 age group. From 2010, we've seen a decrease in that group once they become educated. One reason is that we haven't had the 24-7 livable environment they want, where mixed uses are clustered, there's livability, there's density, there's a 24-7 'vibe.' That segment is more likely to use

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mass transit as opposed to automobiles. They're less likely to have more than one car.

Warwick was built out and peaked in 1980. So we have a housing stock of three-bedroom units. Along with being a gateway, City Centre will also be a home for a resident population of that younger group.

Warwick has had to look in the mirror as part of its full transition into the 21st century. The city is getting older, and the average age is 44. We also have a declining housing population in the sense that fewer people are living in more units. Before 2010, families made up 70 percent of the housing population, and that has dropped to 60 percent. So we're not only looking at re-development in places like City Centre, we're looking at how our housing stock can change to reflect and support the baby boomers, who are now getting older.

So we're looking at universal design, and ways to work with the development community to build houses that support this unique group. In our Comprehensive Plan, we understand how we can develop this diverse housing stock in the city. I know that's aimed at City Centre, but when you look at successful transit-oriented developments throughout the country, the one common denominator is a significant resident population of all income types.

An especially important aspect of the intermodal scenario here is biking. For two years, we reached out to the community to hear what they wanted in terms of this re-development. There was a common opinion that there needs to be connectivity between these areas for pedestrians and cyclists.

So we have a loop around the entire city, but Apponaug isn't part of that. But that will all be rectified in 2014, after the Apponaug Bypass takes 25,000 trips a day off the road right here in front of City Hall. In doing so, we will be able to establish a new and connected bikeway. And that Apponaug node will then be connected to City Centre Warwick and all the other transit options.

AVEDISIAN: That's an important point. In all my discussions with the Rhode Island Builders Association and (Executive Director) John Marcantonio, Warwick is one of the only communities that isn't saying we don't want residential development. We encourage it.

That's important for City Centre, but also for the city overall. The airport grew and took homes, and also population. We need to refill that population somehow. Our goal is to have a mix of different uses in neighborhoods. We've changed our zoning codes in Apponaug and Conimicut to look for more mixed use, such as commercial on the first floor and residential above, and hard street edges so you don't have the setbacks. In many cases we've removed setback requirements in some of the new zoning codes, to encourage multi-uses on the same property.

THE BUILDER: So this is really cutting-edge, "smart growth" planning, especially the village center concept.

AVEDISIAN: As a member of Smart Growth America's board, I think it's great! We just want to see that it gets off the drawing board.

DePASQUALE: The village concept has been applied in Ap-

ponaug and Conimicut since 2011, and we're already seeing the fruits of that in mixed-use development there. It's more form-based zoning, form over function, as opposed to traditional zoning.

We want easy pedestrian interaction, and we want one building to serve multiple functions. There are already two to three successful projects to date in Conimicut Village.

GEAGAN: Warwick is open to residential growth, and in planning for that, I just have to echo Bill DePasquale. Some 75 percent of our housing units are single-family, and in looking at the next generation, they're shunning that traditional home. They're more mobile, and they want to be able to walk to an activity. We need to provide a different type of housing.

THE BUILDER: How do residential contractors get in on all this, especially City Centre?

AVEDISIAN: Just come into the Planning Department. Or go to www.warwickri.gov and you can be directed to the answers for any questions you might have. There's information on individual parcels, what the zoning is, and information about who wants to partner with individual builders. We can tell you who's looking for tenants.

DePASQUALE: What's unique about this is that we're using a traditional zoning process that everyone knows. You go to the zoning book. In this case, we talk about residential densities, and builders will find that we've built in soft advantages for the developer and investor. The density (at City Centre) will be greater than any other area in Warwick, and the design will be within that compartment.

Then there will be a master plan that really guides investment for the whole area. So a developer will know that the parcel next door will have the same level of investment. There will be some kind of surety.

At a moment's notice, a developer can call my office, and I can get a meeting with Karen Jedson, right here, and Commerce Rhode Island, and they can be at the table in one or two days. I don't know anywhere else in this state where that can happen. We've already done it several times. And Commerce Rhode Island (formerly the Economic Development Corp.) brings with it information on all the state incentives.

When we crafted the master plan, we had developers tell us what does and doesn't work. We tried to take all those hurdles and turn them into opportunities. So we can provide that hand-to-hand interaction very quickly out of my office.

AVEDISIAN: We know people who are eager to sell or who have indicated to us that they're looking for partners. So if individual builders want to call, we can share that information.

THE BUILDER: Since 2009, credit has been tight and financing has sometimes been a problem for builders. How much financing is available for City Centre and other projects in Warwick?

AVEDISIAN: For financing, there's a little bit of everything. There are many private owners who have zoning that's all set for

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Senate passes flood insurance relief

National Association of Home Builders

The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) applauded Senate passage of the Homeowner Flood Insurance Affordability Act (S. 1926) on January 30th.

This legislation would provide relief from soaring flood-insurance premiums for countless homeowners across the nation and contains an amendment by Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) that is critical to the health of the remodeling industry, according to NAHB.

“The bill will resolve some of the costly and unintended consequences of the Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Reform Act, including huge premium spikes and impacts on the sale, construction and remodeling of homes across the nation,” said NAHB Chairman Rick Judson, a home builder from Charlotte, N.C.

The Homeowner Flood Insurance Affordability Act would:

- Delay insurance-rate increases for all primary residences until an affordability study is completed.

- Require that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) take into account all local flood-control structures while mapping.

- Allow property owners to appeal FEMA’s mapping decisions and to be reimbursed for their appeal expenses.

- Reinstates an exemption in 53 communities nationwide for basements that are built a certain way.

When the House will vote on the measure is uncertain, but watch for more information.



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their projects but don’t yet have financing. Others have financing, and we can tell builders who’s ready to go. We can put people in touch with the Small Business Administration. Last year, the SBA had more loans in the City of Warwick than in any other community, a good indication of our relationship with them.

DePASQUALE: The investment here has been a composite of opportunity. There are the soft incentives I mentioned, and we have infrastructure grants from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. That directly benefits builders and investors because they might not have to put in sidewalks, street trees or lighting. So we can be matchmakers, so to speak between builders, Commerce Rhode Island and outside sources.

As a rule, traditional underwriting standards can sometimes be a hurdle. So a developer might embrace these new housing ideas, then go to an underwriter who doesn’t recognize that reduced parking is something that meets their ROI (return on investment formula). That’s why we have to get the business and investment communities to understand these new practices and to know that they’re doable, and to get away from the 1960s ideas that are driving most development.

AVEDESIAN: We’re willing to sit down with any group. We’ve had several come in, and we’ve put them in touch with several sources: banks and in some cases the SBA.

THE BUILDER: Notwithstanding the fact that many households are changing, there are still plenty of traditional families with children. Many communities seem to consider these to be undesirable. What’s the view in Warwick?

AVEDESIAN: We need those people in order to stay vibrant and to stay a viable community. We need the mix of population. That’s why we need the mix of housing stock, and we need more rental units.

DePASQUALE: The housing composition is really important. I’ve been here for 24 years now, and for years I’d be before the Zoning Board or the Planning Board, and a subdivision would come up. People would object that this or that house would bring

two or three kids into the school system. That can’t be an argument any longer because the numbers don’t bear it out.

So we welcome households that include children. That being said, our existing housing stock can already accommodate that group. So we don’t need to re-invent the wheel when it comes to that housing stock. We need to augment that stock with other kinds.

THE BUILDER: What percentage of Warwick has municipal water and sewer?

AVEDESIAN: One hundred percent has water, either with Kent County Water Authority or the Warwick Water Division. Seventy percent of our neighborhoods have sewer service. Some of Cowesett and all of Potowomet are not sewered. We’ve been talking with West Warwick and East Greenwich about tying some areas into their systems.

THE BUILDER: What’s “customer service” like in Warwick when it comes to permitting, inspections, fees, etc.?

AVEDESIAN: Well, for one thing, after three meetings between myself and John Marcantonio, we no longer have a lawsuit with RIBA (*The lawsuit was brought by RIBA over the city’s fees. Editor.*) So it goes to show that you can sit down and have a conversation, you can reach an agreement.

We have a study committee looking at ways to improve permitting. We will soon have an online permit-application process. So we’re making progress, and RIBA has helped us look at ways to streamline the whole system.

DePASQUALE: And that has really been in effect since the zoning was changed for City Centre, not that we don’t streamline the rest. But with City Centre, there’s the benefit of a review that’s almost already complete because it’s already in the book. And builders and investors can be assured that, once they’re in, it’s not going to change.

Warwick officials plan to have a forum for RIBA on revisions to the city’s Comprehensive Plan soon. Watch for the date, place and time.

