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South Kingstown RI: New Zoning for an Historic Mill¹



A case from the library of “smart growth” leadership case studies prepared by the New England Environmental Finance Center, available at <http://efc.muskie.usm.maine.edu/pubs.htm>

Abstract. The village of Peace Dale in the town of South Kingstown, Rhode Island, developed around several mills that commenced operations in the 1800s. One mill, known as the Palisades, is still partially active and in excellent condition, but much of its square footage is unutilized. A citizens’ group of artists and business people joined with the mill owners and the town of South Kingstown to develop new zoning regulations to make more flexible the permitted uses for the mill site. The proposed zoning will allow the mill complex to feature a mix of retail, residential, and manufacturing uses, while preserving the exterior of the mill buildings and protecting the river nearby. The narrative describes the public process that led to the development of the proposed new zoning.

¹ Prepared by Maggie Jones for the New England Environmental Finance Center’s “Next Communities Initiative,” Richard Barringer, ed., Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, Portland ME, August 2006. All images courtesy Newport Collaborative Architects. Copyright © 2006 Muskie School of Public Service.

South Kingstown. South Kingstown, comprising some 57 square miles, lies at the southeastern edge of Rhode Island, at the northern end of Point Judith Pond, an enclosed inlet of the Atlantic. Flowing through the town and into Point Judith Pond is the Saugatucket River, the original source of power for the mills that developed in the town. The town comprises many villages, including Curtis Corner, Green Hill, Indian Lake Shore, Kingstown, Matunuck, Middlebridge, Peace Dale, Perryville, Rocky Brook, Snug Harbor, Tuckertown, Usquepaugh, Wakefield, and West Kingstown.

Since colonial times, South Kingstown has supported a mix of agriculture and industry. At one time silversmithing constituted the main artisan work done locally; then in the early 1800s mills began to appear, some situated in the village of Peace Dale along the Saugatucket River. The mills offered the main source of employment in the village through World War II, and Peace Dale as a village developed along with the mills. According to the South Kingstown Chamber of Commerce, “Mill workers’ houses were specially designed with unusually ample windows to benefit spinners and weavers performing piece work at home; they may still be seen on village streets, lending a special feeling to Peace Dale.” The mill system no longer survives in Peace Dale today, but its legacy remains in the layout and character of the village.

In South Kingstown as a whole, current industry includes a mix of manufacturing, tourism, agriculture (especially greenhouses and nurseries), and fishing. The University of Rhode Island is also located in the town. In recent years, South Kingstown has become a destination for “suburbanites purchasing new homes in vast developments,” according the Chamber of Commerce, which reports that “South Kingstown has been recently reported to be the fastest growing town in Rhode Island.”

In 2000 South Kingstown had 27,921 residents. If it were to continue to permit growth under current zoning to maximum build-out, the population could approach 48,000. These housing pressures have made it difficult for lower- and middle-income families to own a home in the town.

The Palisades Mill. The Palisades Mill has had a long history that has been extremely well-documented by its various owners. The site first housed a grist mill in the late 1700s

that was later turned first to wool-fuling, then to wool carding, and finally to wool cloth weaving. Eventually, all of the processes for producing wool cloth were handled in the mill, one of the first instances of a “fully developed factory system” in the state, according to the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission.²

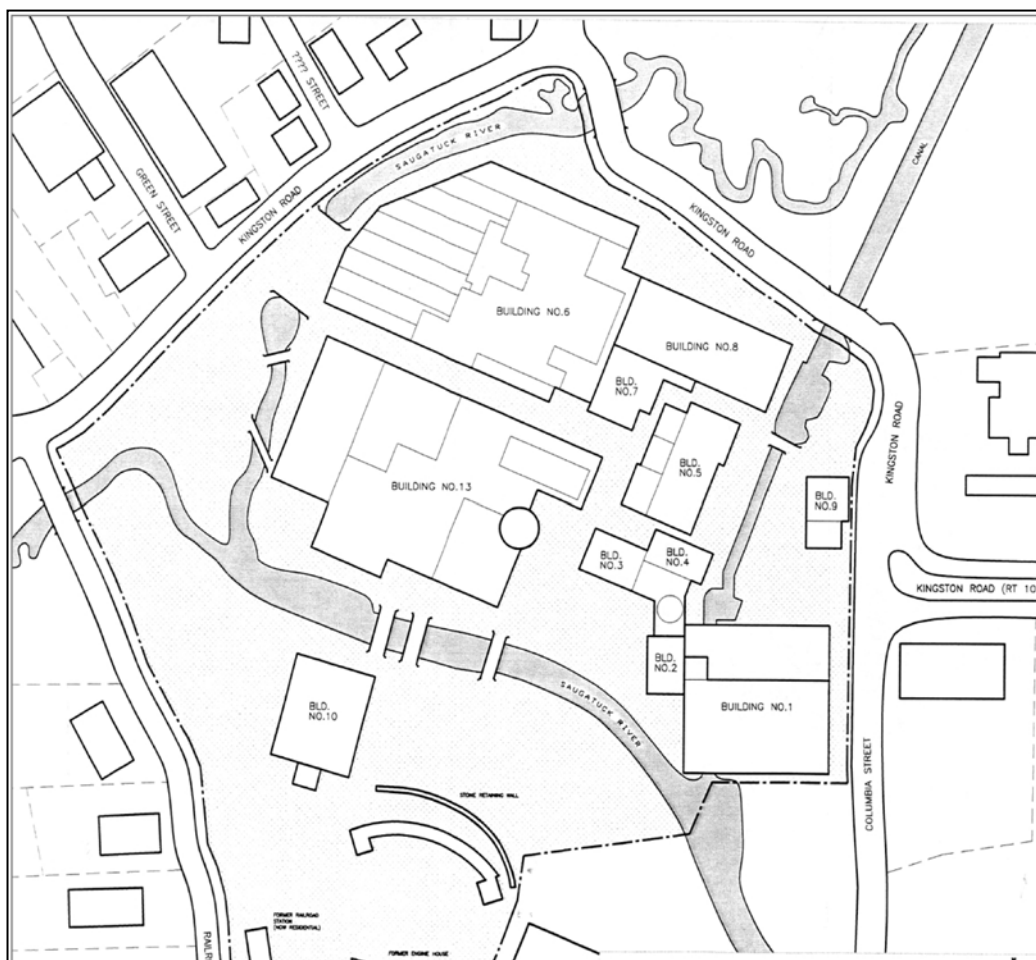
After a fire destroyed the original mill buildings, new structures were built, mostly of granite, between 1844 and 1872. By 1900 the mill employed some 600 people, or about 40% of the population of Peace Dale. The mill continued strong until after World War II, when adverse economic conditions led to a loss of business.

The mill complex changed hands and became derelict between the 1950s and 1968, at which time it was purchased by its present owners, the Guarriello family. The family restored the mill buildings and has performed regular maintenance since. The Guarriellos run a fabric finishing business in the mill, dyeing and waterproofing cotton and synthetic fabrics. They also lease space to a variety of small businesses. The family runs other businesses, including a trucking business, elsewhere in South Kingstown. Vin Murray, the Town’s director of planning, remarks that the Town has an excellent relationship with the Guarriello family. “They have been terrific stewards of the mill and done a great deal for the citizens of Peace Dale, including donating an unused stretch of railway for conversion to a bike path.”

The Site. The Palisades Mill complex encompasses slightly more than 13 acres and 11 buildings, containing approximately 220,000 square feet of useable space; two other buildings on site are not considered suitable for reuse. The buildings, constructed mostly of granite, range from one to four stories. The complex as a whole is on the National Register of Historic Places, though it is not in the town’s designated historic district. A 2003 structural assessment of the buildings showed that most were in excellent condition and well suited for residential or mixed use. Of the buildings only one, number 10, was thought to be in condition poor enough for demolition. It is a later building and not considered to have historic value, nor was it built to support a second floor.

² Historic and Architectural Resources of South Kingstown, Rhode Island: A Preliminary Report, 1984.

The mill complex is a tight fit within Peace Dale, surrounded on all sides by built-up roads and adjoining properties. When the complex was built, workers lived nearby and walked to work; today the village has an ongoing problem of lack of parking, severely limiting the owner’s ability to find tenants for the mill.



The Palisades Mill Complex in Peace Dale

First Steps. The citizens of Peace Dale have long thought the buildings in the mill complex underutilized, according to Shirley Page, a long-term Peace Dale resident, real estate agent, and artist. Page is a member of the Peace Dale Neighborhood Revitalization Committee, started approximately 16 years ago by local artists and originally known as the Friends of Peace Dale. The group added other local citizens over the years, including

businesspeople, creating an organization that has been “a really productive force in the community,” according to Page. Its projects include a youth program, parking lot improvements, sidewalk paving, and outdoor movies. At the Friends’ inception it conceived the idea of using vacant space in the mill as galleries and artists’ residences. At the same time, the owners of the mill began looking for new ways to use the property.

In 2002, the Town of South Kingstown got involved, largely due to concerns that the mill might be sold to a developer who would change its uses, specifically to 100% residential. Several mills in nearby towns had been reused in this manner; because Peace Dale has only a small amount of commercial or industrial property in the village, neither the Town nor concerned citizens felt that 100% residential would be an appropriate use. Further, the Town wished to make future development of the mill complex a collaborative effort between the mill owners and the community.

To look into these matters further, the Town appointed the Palisades Reuse Committee, made up of Murray, Page, mill owner Gary Guarriello, and several other members of the community. Using a grant from the Rhode Island Housing (Note: what is? Authority?), the committee hired Newport Collaborative Architects, Inc., to survey the site and develop options for its use. The firm has a long experience both in mill reuse and community consensus building, according to Arnold Robinson, project leader for Newport Collaborative.

Public Process. Newport Collaborative’s first step was to look at factors that might impede development of the mill complex. A structural conditions analysis was extremely encouraging, according to Robinson. “I have never seen a mill in such good condition. (We) literally found two cracked beams and a rotten post. That is very rare.” A review of environmental conditions focused on the residue of manufacturing at the site and possible impacts to the river to be considered when determining appropriate reuse. Completing the analysis were a space inventory; the architectural, historical, and site planning considerations for the mill complex; and a real estate market analysis to determine “what kind of uses could really be supported in the South Kingstown real estate market,” according to Robinson.

Newport Collaborative then conducted a “community visioning process” consisting of two public workshops with the Palisades Reuse Committee and citizens of Peace Dale. The first, in November 2003, dealt with the results of the market analysis and the environmental and structural studies. Participants learned of the current condition of the buildings; the environmental issues that would need to be resolved, which were considered “minimal” and largely concerned with the residue of manufacturing; and the issue of parking.³

Finally, Newport Collaborative went over current Town plans and regulations that would need to be addressed in any new plan for the mill complex. Among these were the goals of the Town’s comprehensive plan, including: retaining the small-town character, providing affordable housing, encouraging citizen participation, and controlling urban sprawl.

One of the principles guiding the thinking of the Town and Newport Collaborative was to “take the element of fantasy out of the equation,” according to Robinson. “One of people’s inclinations was to say, ‘Wouldn’t it be *great* to have incubator offices down here!’ But one of the issues found in the real estate analysis was that you’re 30 minutes off Route 1. It’s not close to a major intersection. The University

³ Current zoning requirements include: for residential use, 2 spaces per unit; for office use, 1 space per 350 square feet. Newport Collaborative suggested that participants in the community visioning process begin looking at creative solutions to parking, such as indoor parking facilities and time-sensitive, daytime-versus-evening parking.

of Rhode Island’s office isn’t big enough to accommodate that much square footage. (We) said, ‘here are usages that are feasible, these are not.’” The real estate assessment indicated that a strong market existed for condominiums for “baby-boomers,” as well as for office space and some retail; it concluded that a mix of uses would stabilize the economics of redevelopment and allow developers to change uses as market demands change.

After these reports, participants broke into small groups, each led by a representative from the Town, the Reuse Committee, or Newport Collaborative. The groups were tasked to answer four questions:

- What uses would you most like to see in a redeveloped Palisades Mill ten years from now?
- What uses would be acceptable in a redeveloped Palisades Mill ten years from now?
- What uses should not be allowed in a redeveloped Palisades Mill ten years from now?
- What is your vision for the broader impact to Peace Dale and South Kingstown of a redeveloped Palisades Mill ten years from now (that is, positive impacts to strive for and negative impacts to avoid or minimize)?

The questions were designed to get people to state their ideal use for the mill, which might be unrealistic, and then to think beyond that to what would be acceptable to them, according to Robinson. Participants were given rules for discussion, including “speak your truth,” “listen with rapture,” and “no personal or hidden agendas.”

Giving participants a realistic portrait of the mill and appropriate uses was critical to discussion, according to Robinson. “You have to walk the public through every bit of data provided by the experts, or you’ll get a knee-jerk reaction, with people saying, let’s do daycare, let’s do affordable housing – whatever their particular need might be” at the moment, he said.

Community Priorities. At a second workshop three weeks later, in December 2003, Newport Collaborative reported on the break-out groups’ optimal, acceptable, and unacceptable uses for the mill complex. Mixed use was considered optimal, with some residential, some retail, and some light industrial uses. Participants hoped to see jobs

created from a mix of retail stores, restaurants, non-profits, and artisans. One optimal use was to create artists' space at the mill, both studio space and living/work areas. Participants were also eager to have some performance space and educational facilities. In terms of fitting the area into the community, participants wished to see public transportation for the mill complex, open space, and the continuation of a bike path to the northwest of the site.

Acceptable uses for the site included a mix of residential types, from luxury condos to elderly or affordable (median-income) housing; a high-end hotel or inn; environmentally sound industry; and indoor parking or selective demolition of buildings to create parking.

From the beginning, a major concern for the citizens of Peace Dale was that the mill might be turned into low-income housing. The village already has a preponderance of low-income and affordable housing, according to planning director Vin Murray. Each break-out group at the first workshop identified low-income housing as an unacceptable use. Other unacceptable uses included chain restaurants or retail, large firms that would take over the entire site; any use with a nuisance characteristic; any automobile-related business; and a gated community. Participants insisted that 100% of any use was not acceptable, with the exception of the mill's original industrial use.

Finally, participants identified their wishes for the broader impact of development. They saw the mill as possibly creating a new center for the village that would be ethnically and creatively diverse, a destination for residents and tourists, alike. They also saw opportunity for the mill to drive the village and the town economically, build a sense of community, and energize Peace Dale as a whole.

Armed with this information, Newport Collaborative developed four scenarios for the complex and reported them to the second workshop, as follows:

	Scenario			
	Housing Focus	Economic Development Focus	Arts-Related Focus	Balanced Focus
Housing sq. ft.	115,100	0	52,625	57,625
Housing units	96	0	35	38
Commercial square ft.	45,575	145,600	87,975	87,975
Restaurant square ft.	8,820	8,820	8,820	8,820
Retail sq. ft.	0	15,075	10,075	15,075
Performance space sq. ft.	0	0	11,700	0
Parking deficit, spaces	77	213	253	133

Newport Collaboratives’s Four Scenarios for the Palisades Mill

The intent of Newport Collaborative in presenting these several scenarios was to allow the property owner and the community to see the range of acceptable uses in different percentages, each focused on a desire expressed in the previous workshop.

Parking, however, became “the tail that wags the dog,” according to Robinson. “We had the economic development people saying that they wanted maximum job growth and an expanded tax base [from industry]; but even with the demolition of building 10 for a parking facility, there was still a deficit of 213 spaces.”

While the housing focus scenario created the least parking burden, participants at the second meeting went for the balanced use, feeling that an exclusively residential focus would isolate the development from the rest of the community. Further, participants came to the conclusion that an arts focus would have to come from market forces rather than deliberate planning, due to the lower rents associated with arts use, the need for grants and incentives, and so forth.

Final Report and Implementation Strategy. Newport Collaborative took the results of the second workshop and from an on-line comment board, and prepared a final report on the development options for Palisades Mill. After submitting the report to the Reuse Committee, according to Robinson, the firm asked what the committee wished to do next. “We basically asked, ‘You have a private owner, and it’s already zoned industrial – how

do you put this into play?” The Reuse Committee struggled with this question for some six months.. Two options were considered: to use tax incentives for desired development, or to zone percentages of use to get the wished-for mix. The committee ultimately preferred to use zoning as the tool.

The length of decision time was due to two main forces on the committee, housing v. economic development. Some members were interested in letting market forces determine the type of development that would occur, and did not wish to predetermine percentages of use. Further, while everyone agreed on the “vision” for the mill – that reuse was necessary, that the mill must be preserved, that any reuse must fit into Peace Dale’s character – when it came to making policy decisions about the mill, there was not unanimity about what should actually go inside its walls.

Ultimately, the committee decided to require percentages of different uses, but left the main use for the mill industrial, even as much as 100%. According to Page, “There isn’t a lot of commercial space in the area, and to move the industrial zoning—it isn’t a good idea. At the same time there is a lot of wasted space [in the mill complex]. I don’t see it as a flourishing industrial project ever again, because those kinds of mills don’t exist any more.” Thus, the proposed zoning would permit far greater flexibility and ensure that the mill complex never turns over to 100% of any use unless it is industrial. Market forces indicate that 100% industrial cannot be supported, so new options for use must be created.

With this information in hand, Newport Collaborative worked up an implementation strategy and submitted it to the Reuse Committee and the Town in September 2004. It recommended:

- establishment of a new Peace Dale (Palisades) Mill Reuse District ordinance, with a mix of uses flexible enough so that “redevelopment is economically viable and sustainable,” including the currently permitted industrial use up to full use of the mill complex, various types of residential uses, arts-related uses, and business incubators;
- regulations respecting allotment of open space, architectural requirements, setbacks from environmentally sensitive areas, and so forth;
- amendments to both the Town’s comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance, to these effects; and
- financial incentives in the form of state and federal tax credits for preservation of

historic buildings.

Current Status. At a work session held on May 4, 2005, members of the Reuse Committee and Newport Collaborative presented a report to members of the Town Council and Planning Board. They then went over much the same ground as earlier discussions, to bring Council and Planning Board members up to date on the issues and the proposed solutions. Some new ideas brought to the table included creating an historic overlay to preserve the exterior of the buildings and a river corridor overlay to protect the river. At the meeting, Gary Guarriello announced that the family is capable of developing the mill but is interested in keeping it in manufacturing use as much as possible.

After the Town Council and Planning Board came into the process, work began on drafting zoning, based on Newport Collaborative's implementation strategy. As it now stands, the South Kingstown Planning Board has balked at some of the percentages of use suggested in the implementation strategy, concerned that a given use may overwhelm the historic industrial use of the mill. There is concern that industrial use would be "adversarial" to residential use, according to planning director Murray, and that residential use may win out in the long run. However, Murray feels that agreement among the Planning Board members on the proposed changes is close. The final step would be to take the proposed zoning amendments to the Town Council for adoption.

Murray expresses frustration at the length of time it has taken to reach the point of presenting the zoning changes to the Council. In part, this is due to the fact that the Guarriellos have recently had more success at renting mill space to commercial tenants. "The concern that they would sell the complex created the impetus for change, and that's worn off a bit," he said. Real estate agent and artist Shirley Page sees the changes in zoning as creating a great opportunity for both the village and the family. When asked if she thinks the Guarriello family will develop the mill within the more flexible opportunities created by the new zoning, she answers, "They'd be crazy not to."

TEACHING NOTES:

Important ideas illustrated in the South Kingstown case include:

1. Timing is important: strike while the iron is hot!
2. Include important stakeholders from the start: the absence of Planning Board and Town Council members from public participation process may have compromised the implementation effort. Further, a village does not a town make: if the village wishes to go in a direction the town may not be comfortable with, it needs to persuade the town of this.
3. Good analysis can shape and enable decision-making for change; analysis is often useful in bringing stakeholders down to “reality.”
4. Good process, involving all stakeholders with a potential veto, is necessary to effect democratic change.
5. A shared vision, informed by sound analysis, can move a community toward change.
6. Creative funding matters: making creative use of available funding sources for both needed analysis and good public process is most often necessary.
7. Public leadership matters: the commitment of the town, through its Planning Director in this case, is a powerful element in moving a community ahead.