

POLITICS

R.I. GOP reflects party shift to right

"Libertarian is not a bad word in this delegation, it's a good word," says state chair Mark Zaccaria

By JOHN E. MULLIGAN
JOURNAL WASHINGTON BUREAU

TAMPA, Fla. — Rhode Island's delegates to the Republican National Convention may be sold on the proposition that President Obama has wasted his opportunity to restore the nation's economy, but they are realistic about the odds facing Mitt Romney in their state this fall.

"Rhode Island will remain Rhode Island," said Republican National Committeewoman Carol Mumford. Still, the former state representative from Scituate said local Republicans have a role to play this fall because they have seen firsthand "exactly what the policies of the far left have done" to dampen a business climate and the job creation that depends on it.

Partly for that reason, "We are to the right of a generation ago, but to the left of the national party," Mumford said in one of a series of pre-convention interviews with

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POLITICS

Voter-fraud accusations nothing new

In 1940, 169 people were indicted in Rhode Island for allegedly conspiring to rig an election

By G. WAYNE MILLER
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — As an example of voter fraud in Rhode Island, the story that broke on the eve of Valentine's Day, 1940, stands in a class of its own — but only for its breathtaking audacity. Real and alleged, shady business with ballots has a long history here, dating back to early-republic times and still continuing, as events of last week proved.

The front page of The Providence Journal on Feb. 13, 1940, featured stories about President Roosevelt's New Deal and a world descending deeper into war — "Nazis Set Ship Afire When Approached by

SEE **FRAUD, A17**

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

At this school, recovery will be core curriculum

By RICHARD SALIT
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — It's not much to look at.

No gymnasium. No art studio. No computer lab. Just three small rooms.

Rhode Island's first recovery high school — devoted entirely to students with substance-abuse problems — bears no resemblance to a traditional high school.

And that's a good thing, administrators say.

"We want to build a close-knit commu-

SEE **RECOVERY, A15**

WARWICK | THE STATION DISTRICT

Ripe for development



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/JOHN FREIDAH/TOM MURPHY

City envisions 'new downtown' of homes, businesses

By BARBARA POLICHETTI
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

WARWICK — Can trains, planes and automobiles pull an old industrial area out of the doldrums and boost the state's economy by attracting new businesses?



City and state officials hope so. They want to capitalize on what they see as a winning transportation combination: T.F. Green Airport connected to a new train station via sky bridge — all within a half mile of easy highway access.

The area around the transportation hub that the city thinks is ripe for redevelopment has been identified as roughly 100 acres of privately owned land in the heart of the city along Jefferson Boulevard and Post Road.

It is referred to as the "Station District," and officials hope it becomes Warwick's new downtown with offices, hotels, shops and urban-style residences, such



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/KATHY BORCHERS

William DePasquale, right, Warwick's director of planning, with Governor Chafee, center, in June as they tour T.F. Green Airport.

as apartments and loft condominiums. The city also envisions a well-planted, attractive streetscape that will entice residents to walk the area rather than drive.

Even though it will probably take years to become reality, Governor Chafee says the Station District has great potential

and getting it off the ground is one of his top priorities.

"I see this area now as one of our most important assets," Chafee said. "If there's a company interested in coming to Rhode Island, this is one of the first places I will take them."

City officials say they are

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Investing in Warwick

Co-owners of restaurant, tavern bet on Station District. **A11**

John Kostrzewa

Business coalition needed to promote development of T.F. Green. **A11**

On the Web

Find interactive graphics on passenger traffic at the airport and commuter train station. Also find more Reinvent RI stories and reader polls.

On Twitter

Start a conversation about Warwick's plans and R.I.'s economy at #reinventRI.

banking on the easy access to transform a faded part of the city that was once a mill village and later a manufacturing and industrial area.

"When you want to get an area ready for development, the first

SEE **DISTRICT, A10**

A showcase project he can call his own

Mike D'Ambra is moving his construction business so he can build a hotel complex next to the train station

By BARBARA POLICHETTI
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Mike D'Ambra has spent more than 40 years building things for other people.

Local roads, state roads, federal roads — he's dug and paved countless miles of them.

He's installed utility lines, prepped large tracts of land for subdivisions and manufactured mountains of asphalt.

But he's never had a showcase project that he could call his own.

A self-made businessman who owns one of the largest road construction companies in the state, D'Ambra, 65, is planning to change all that.

Like the City of Warwick, he sees great opportunity for development around the airport and train station, so he is packing up his 8-acre Jefferson Boulevard construction headquarters and asphalt plant and moving the whole operation to Johnston to free up the land to construct a hotel, office and retail complex.

D'Ambra didn't wait for the city to put all its zoning incentives in place for the new Station District. Back in 2009, he secured permission for his ambitious project, which will be built in phases and is planned to have a 300-plus room hotel, parking garage for about 2,000 cars and several multistory



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/JOHN FREIDAH

Developer Michael D'Ambra plans to invest more than \$250 million in Warwick's Station District for a hotel and office buildings where his asphalt operation now stands.

office and retail buildings.

D'Ambra recently sat in his spacious corner office and talked about his dream project, which he has said will cost \$253 million or more.

"This is what I want to leave my family," he said. "All my life, I've

dug holes."

D'Ambra said he started thinking about building something special in Warwick back in the 1990s, when he first heard talk that there might be a train station built near

SEE **COMPLEX, A11**



DISTRICT

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Using a transit hub

thing you look at is your infrastructure and what you have in place," Mayor Scott Avedisian said. "Well, we have it all in one place — an airport, a train station, bus service and great access to Routes 95 and 295."

To lure developers, the city has created new zoning for the area that will allow for denser development. Buildings can be taller, closer together and built right up to the sidewalk.

William DePasquale, the city's planning director, said having buildings nudge the sidewalk is a return to the look and feel of an old-fashioned downtown. The Station District is now the only area in Warwick where buildings do not have to be set back from the pavement.

"We want that pedestrian interaction," DePasquale said.

"We want an active streetscape with restaurants and shops on the ground level. Also services like dry cleaners or shoe repair shops — the types of places that people stop in often."

Mayor Avedisian noted that Warwick does not have a traditional downtown. Rather, its older retail areas are made up of a collection of small village centers.

For the Station District, he said, "I can see someone taking the commuter rail home, going to their apartment and condo to change, and then enjoying the evening at a local restaurant with friends — without ever having to use their car."

Warwick's vision for what is now a scruffy-looking area has been discussed and revised numerous times since the idea was broached more than 15 years ago when Governor Chafee was mayor of the city.

The impetus, Chafee recalls, was discussion in the mid 1990s about Amtrak's desire to build a train station near the airport.

Over the years, Amtrak bowed out and the state Department of Transportation and Rhode Island Airport Corporation stepped in to see the station project through. The result was a \$267-million complex called the InterLink that features a rail station served by the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, car rental companies and a large parking garage with room for the rental fleets and commuters.

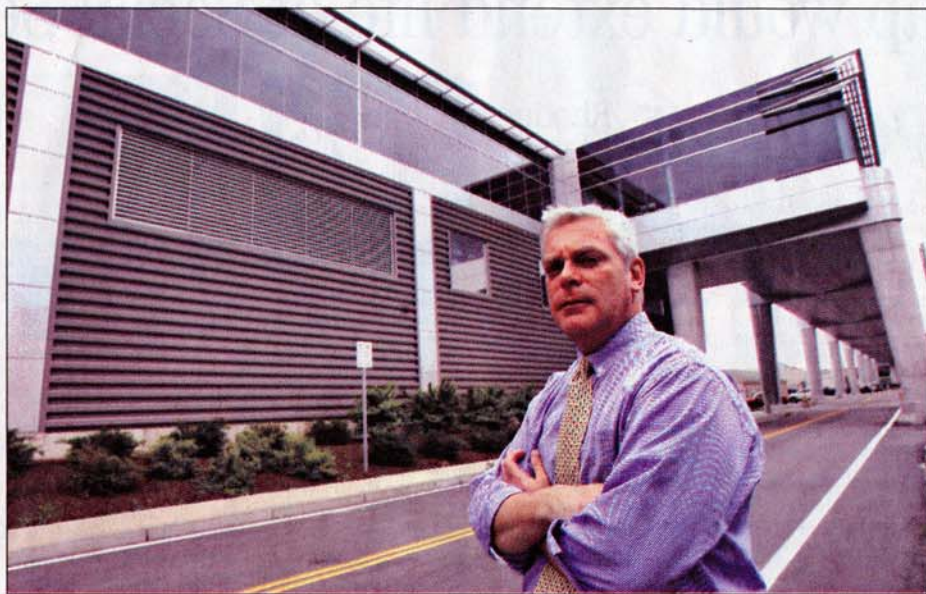
The complex, which opened in the fall of 2010, is linked to Green via a sky bridge that crosses Post Road and which officials say offers not only convenience, but protection from unpredictable New England weather. Chafee said it was designed to accommodate at least a couple of buildings that want to "dock" directly to it, so there is the possibility of travelers being able to enter a hotel or other business right from the skyway.

Chafee says he remains as enthusiastic about the transportation hub as he was from the beginning. And like local officials, he sees the development zone as the perfect New England spot for corporate conferences.

Participants could arrive at Green, walk across the sky bridge to a hotel hosting the conference and then fly out — without ever needing a car, he said. If they decided to explore Rhode Island a bit, the rental car companies are right there.

Avedisian said that the Station District is a way for Warwick to capitalize on having a regional airport in its midst — an airport that is undergoing a \$165-million improvement and runway expansion project, and which also just welcomed JetBlue as another affordable carrier.

The idea of using transportation to seed development, particularly in urban areas, has been a successful formula across the country for at least 20 years.



Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian stands under the new sky bridge at T.F. Green Airport and below the building where the airport rental counters are located. The bridge connects the airport with the commuter rail station.

Average daily commuter rail riders at T. F. Green

In 2010, Rhode Island added a commuter rail station to link T. F. Green Airport to Boston. Since then the average number of daily riders has more than doubled.



Yearly airline passenger counts at T. F. Green

After peaking in 2005, the yearly number of passengers using T. F. Green Airport has been in decline.



SOURCE: R.I. Department of Transportation, R.I. Airport Corporation
THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

National urban development expert Christopher B. Leinberger is familiar with dozens of so-called "transit-oriented districts" — from Oregon to Virginia. Warwick's hope for a concentrated mix of retail, office space and residences is typical, he said.

What is not so typical, he said, is Warwick's reliance on commuter rail linked to an airport.

Airports in and of themselves do not generally kindle development around them, Leinberger said, and there is little case history to show whether an air-commuter rail link can attract enough development to sustain a new district.

"That's not to say it won't work," he said.

Leinberger is president of Locus, a national consortium of real estate developers who work in partnership with Smart Growth America to advocate for sustainable and "walkable" urban development. He is also a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy think tank based in Washington, D.C.

The typical recipe for success, he said, is abundant ground transportation that offers frequent stops, such as subways and trolleys. He also said that while there is great demand for pedestrian-friendly urban areas across the country, they "take a lot of



Travelers in the passenger walkway leading to the airport. City and state officials view Green as a transportation hub that can spur development.

hard work" and many never get off the drawing board.

DePasquale and senior city planner Dan Geagan, who have been immersed in the details of the Station District for more than a decade, say they are aware of the challenges and are not daunted.

Neither is state Planning Director Kevin Flynn.

"You have the real possibility of creating a true, mixed-use walkable downtown type area there," he said. "You could totally transform the area and you have the potential to create something we don't have in the state."

Regarding concerns that an airport may not be a big draw for developers, Flynn said, "The airport has been there for years, but now we have the added element of rail.

"That is the infusion of something new."

While about 200 commuters a day use the Warwick train station currently, city officials believe that the number will grow. Flynn and DePasquale noted that it takes years

to grow ridership on any public transportation system.

"It takes time to mature a commuter population," DePasquale said. "We know this, and that is why the residential component is such an important part of the Station District plan."

Once loft-style condominiums or other attractive urban residences get people living in the Station District, their reliance on the commuter rail could make it practical for the MBTA to increase service on the line, he explained.

One of the scenarios the city sees for the area would be a mix of 40 percent to 45 percent office and hotel space, 10 percent to 20 percent retail and entertainment and 40 percent to 45 percent residential.

DePasquale and Geagan said the city's zoning incentives should draw interest from developers — plus the city plans to streamline the permitting process for new development. Also, the city is ready to help developers con-

tact landowners in attempts to secure parcels they want to develop.

While the city is working on writing design guidelines for the district, Avedisian said, it will not dictate building materials or an architectural style. DePasquale said the city wants to be flexible, right down to the boundaries of the district itself. He said the city can easily expand the district to include surrounding properties, such as the old textile mill that most recently housed Leviton, an electronics component maker.

The city is not currently offering developers monetary incentives, such as phased-in property taxes.

Officials are concentrating on marketing the district with the help of the governor's office and other state departments.

Earlier this month the city learned it had won a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation, primarily for marketing the Station District. Also, working

with the state, the city has already begun bringing in real estate scouts from across the country for tours of the district.

"Now we have to get out there and buck this inclement economy," Chafee said. "We want to make sure this is on everyone's radar."

An advantage Warwick has, city officials say, is that it is focusing on a small area. Transportation districts in other parts of the country are often much larger, connecting many communities and covering anywhere from a few square miles to several-hundred square miles.

When asked for a prime example of a successful transportation district, most professional planners look west and point to Portland, Ore., for its use of mass transit to keep a major city vital while also sparking development in surrounding areas. The gargantuan "TriMet" transportation system that serves the area offers electric trains, commuter rail and streetcars — all combining to create an impressive network that serves Portland and more than two dozen other cities across three counties.

The rail system has seeded a few high-density, mixed-use developments in the 570 square miles it serves. In the Orenco Station community, a planned development zone west of Portland, residents can access the giant mass transit system while living in a pleasant tree-lined area where they can walk to almost any amenity.

Imagination is needed to picture the Station District as the city hopes it evolves, Avedisian and Chafee acknowledge.

The area is a patchwork of privately owned parcels and a mix of mismatched businesses — many of which are located in one-story, cinder-block buildings. There are a couple of remaining rows of old millworker houses, vacant lots and, right beneath the sleek glass-walled sky bridge, an overgrown "graveyard" for worn-out lemonade trucks.

"I see affordable property when I look at that," Chafee said, noting that real estate in Warwick is far more affordable than Boston or New York. DePasquale said the city has compared housing costs with Boston suburbs on the MBTA line and found that you can live in Warwick for about 30 percent less.

Skeptics, Avedisian said, need only to look at what the area looked like 10 to 15 years ago.

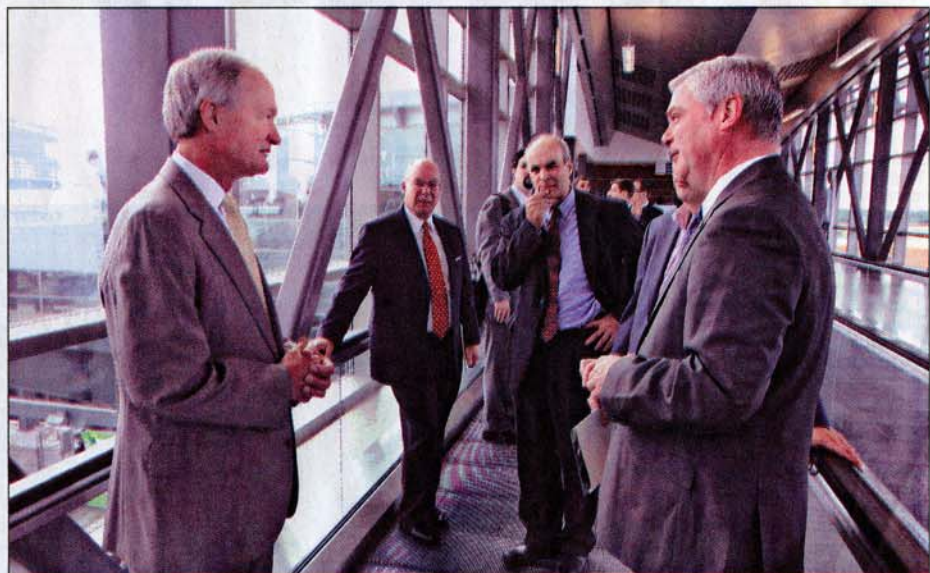
Part of the land where the train station and parking garage now stand had been home to the former T.H. Balis chemical company, he said.

"We have to remember where we've been," he said.

"This is an opportunity to create a new sense of place in Warwick — and that's an opportunity you don't get very often.

"We need to make sure we get this right."

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Governor Chafee, left, Kevin Dillon, former president of the Rhode Island Airport Corporation, Michael Lewis, director of the state Department of Transportation, and Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian at Green Airport in June as part of a tour of the Station District.