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Contact: Jeff C. Davis, AICP, APA-RI President- (202) 431-3312

Every year, the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA-RI) honors the projects and people that make Rhode Island a better place to live. This year, in lieu of selling tickets to the virtual awards ceremony on January 14 at 6PM, APA-RI has encouraged members and attendees to donate to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank during this time of extreme need.

APA-RI is a non-profit public interest and research organization dedicated to urban, suburban, regional and rural planning, made up of planners at all government levels, private consultants, local planning board members and other professionals dedicated to sound planning principles.

For more information about APA-RI and how planners and community planning help make Rhode Island a better place to live, please visit www.rhodeislandapa.org.

Congratulations to the 2020 APA-RI Award Winners!

• Award for Excellent Comprehensive Plan: Fuss and O’Neill for the Town of Barrington Bay Spring Resilience Plan.

With an extensive coastline and significant sections of town within low-lying areas near the shore, Barrington is one of Rhode Island’s most vulnerable communities to natural hazards. The Resilience Plan lays out a vision for making Barrington’s Bay Spring neighborhood more resilient to climate events and sea level rise, including through a combination of natural systems, green stormwater treatment practices, and edge hardening to improve the neighborhood’s shoreline and buffer inland areas. Improvements to the neighborhood’s emergency preparedness and response programs also expand the Town’s ability to respond to climate change.

• Award for Excellence in Plan Implementation: The Town of Cumberland for the Mercy Woods Conservation and Management Plan Implementation.

The former Sisters of Mercy site in Cumberland consists of 243 acres of woodlands, open fields, vernal pools, wetlands, footpaths and stone walls. Over a period of six months, the Cumberland Planning Department drafted a conservation and management plan for the property that detailed the parcels to be retained by the community and the creation of “Mercy Woods,” a 229-acre conservation project, which included a 17.5-acre active recreation area. The Plan was implemented through financial commitments from the Town, Pawtucket Water, the Cumberland Land Trust and grants from RIDEM and the Champlin Foundation. The Cumberland Land Trust has designed and installed a marked trail system with an inner and outer loop, enabling extensive hiking and public access along with environmental conservation.

• Award for Excellence in Transportation Planning Implementation: RIPTA for their new “Wave” Smart Fare Collection System App. The use of smart card technology, enabling individuals to store monetary value on a reloadable card, has been in widespread use
since the early 2000’s: however, very few transit agencies have considered taking the next step of introducing an account-based system that allows riders to manage their use entirely digitally – without the need to use cash or directly interface with a ticket vending machine. RIPTA’s WAVE system, which publicly launched this fall, is one of the first in the country to implement such a system to the benefit of all Rhode Islanders.

**Town of Narragansett** for the **South County Bike Path**. The William C. O’Neill Bicycle Path Section, also known as the “South County Bike Path,” was constructed by the Town of Narragansett after receiving a $750,000 grant from the RI Green Economy Bond in 2017. What makes this small segment of the bike path so significant is the combination of grassroots support, Town initiative, RIDOT acquiescence to transfer property, RI General Assembly support and the provision of a temporary terminus point at the Town’s Community Center. Additionally, the design of the only road-crossing at Mumford Road incorporates technology not previously used in Rhode Island to enhance pedestrian and bicyclist safety.

- **Award for Best Virtual Participation Process:**

  **The Town of Johnston**. With the start of the COVID pandemic in March 2020, public meetings left the public realm and went virtual. Like most communities, Johnston initially struggled with implementing this new approach. Meetings would have to be held both in-person and virtually to accommodate people who felt uncomfortable attending or those who could not attend because the in-person space was at capacity. In response, the Town created a series of rules for attending public meetings that were inserted into all public notices and in notices mailed to abutters. Laptops were purchased for all board members and staff, and one for the in-person witness’s table, to afford seamless interaction with people attending virtually. Digital microphones and speakers were purchased so that those in attendance could hear everyone who was attending virtually. To reduce sound feedback, each board member and staff was given a headset with an earpiece and a microphone; this allowed board members to hear both those in attendance virtually and in-person. Finally, the Town connected a laptop to screens in the room for attendees to see both the plans that were shared and the people attending virtually.

  **The City of Cranston**. After the COVID lockdown in the Spring of 2020, the City of Cranston Planning Department introduced a virtual meeting procedure to continue the regular business of its Boards and Commissions that included new ways for residents to access documents and consideration for public participation of those who may not have access to a computer. The Cranston Planning Department is credited with being the first municipal group in the City to use Zoom as its standard meeting tool, which then paved the way for more regular use of Zoom across other City Departments.

For individuals who do not have access to a computer or internet, every public notice and agenda for a City virtual meeting also contains instructions for participating by phone. Staff and Commission Chairs who facilitate meetings take time to ensure that all participants, whether
connecting by computer or phone, have ample opportunity to learn about projects and provide input.

Finally, the Planning Department now uses its page of the City’s website as a clearinghouse for application materials. All aspects of public participation, including pre-meeting review and post-meeting follow-up, can now occur in a virtual format. However, the City will mail out hard copies of application materials to anyone who cannot access the City’s website.

Johnston and Cranston are recognized for being at the forefront of virtual participation, and serving as examples that many other communities around the state now follow.

- **President’s Award**: Lawyers Andrew M. Teitz and Amy H. Goins of the firm Ursillo, Teitz & Ritch, Ltd., Providence, in honor of their generous and expert pro bono legal assistance to APA-RI during this year of unprecedented challenges and uncertainty.

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