



[Rhode Island news](#)

[Comments](#) 14 | [Recommend](#) 2

R.I. is 'not a basket case,' says GrowSmart

01:00 AM EDT on Friday, May 14, 2010

By G. Wayne Miller

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — While practical advice on building a new economy will be available in abundance at Friday's "Power of Place" conference, a spirit of optimism may prove to be the greater value from the proceedings at the Rhode Island Convention Center.

Sponsored by GrowSmart RI, the statewide interest group devoted to sustainable economic and cultural development, the daylong conference is expected to attract hundreds of experts and individuals from the government and private sectors.

Participants will be able to learn about innovative approaches to transportation, agriculture, design, urban planning, wind and solar energy, regulatory reform and more. They will hear officials from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, among other groups. They will learn more about President Obama's smart-growth initiatives, an early priority of his administration.

And if GrowSmart RI has its way, participants — most of them from Rhode Island — will return home with a refreshing new attitude.

"One of our big concerns about Rhode Island's economic development strategy is that it's been focused primarily on our liabilities and on neutralizing our liabilities rather than capitalizing on our strengths," GrowSmart RI executive director Scott Wolf said in an interview. Among the liabilities: the perception of widespread government corruption, and tax rates that many business leaders decry as burdensome.

"Not that we dismiss these concerns," Wolf said. "They are real. But we think there has been an obsession with these things to the point that almost nothing else seems to matter to some of our policymakers.

"We're trying to shift the focus away from damage control to a bolder, more optimistic approach to economic development that says: We've got a lot to offer here. We're not a basket case. Yes, we've got some problems — but we also have a lot of strengths, and we're not nurturing those strengths. And if we don't nurture those strengths, we will have at best a mediocre economy."

GrowSmart RI promotes many strengths that Rhode Island offers, including its airport, its ports, its prime coastal location in the Northeast Corridor, its tourist trade, its many historic buildings and the knowledge base of its universities and research industries.

“There are plenty of other places that have corruption. There are plenty of other places that have inefficiencies,” Wolf said. “We’ve got to move beyond that. It’s really our responsibility to take more stock of our strengths and be more creative about capitalizing on them, and that’s what a lot of this conference is about.”

Participants may register by calling (401) 273-5711, or in person at the Convention Center on Friday.

More information is available at the GrowSmart RI site, <http://www.growsmartri.org/index.cfm?>

gwmiller@projo.com