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Mayor Grebien testifies in support of "micro zone" legislation

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Pawtucket mayor Donald Grebien testified at the statehouse before a House panel in support of proposed legislation that would create "micro zones" to promote economic development in so-called distressed areas in five eligible communities, including Pawtucket.

The stated aim of the Micro Zone Economic Revitalization Act is to promote economic revitalization, job creation and business development through rehabilitation of "obsolete, dilapidated and abandoned industrial and commercial structures."

Grebien told members of the House finance committee, chaired by Rep. Raymond Gallison Jr., that the proposed legislation is an "innovative approach" for communities like Pawtucket that are "at a significant competitive disadvantage when it comes to attracting business" for lack of available pad sites or undeveloped raw land.

"The bill before you seeks to level the economic development playing field for constrained communities like Pawtucket," Grebien told the lawmakers.

Grebien said Pawtucket had two areas that could receive an economic boost by qualifying under the Micro Zone bill: the Conant/Clark mill complex straddling the border with Central Falls, with more than one million s/f of vacant mill space among eight scattered properties, and the downtown core.

Pawtucket's downtown has more than 10 qualifying buildings, with over 200,000 s/f of "vacant and underutilized space in buildings whose retrofit costs don't pencil out in terms of market payback," Grebien said. "Without this set of incentives offered through this bill, these buildings and the other potential job generator opportunities within them will likely never see the light of day."

Grebien also noted that the bill was "carefully crafted to avoid attracting businesses already operating elsewhere in the state. It is designed exclusively to bring in new business to our state. And second, the bill contemplates a partnership with the local communities."

The legislation was put forward by Governor Chafee, who chairs the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation, with commerce executive director Marcel Valois. Primary sponsors in the House are Reps. Kenneth Marshall, William O'Brien, Joseph Almeida, Cale Keable and Robert Craven Sr.

The city of Pawtucket would, as provided in the legislation, expedite permitting, waive all permit fees and provide a 10-year tax stabilization agreement for businesses participating in a micro zone, Grebien said. He called on lawmakers to "partner with us on this important piece of economic development legislation, which will have a potentially transformative impact in the city of Pawtucket."

As detailed in the legislation, the proposed micro zones would enable expedited permitting processes, waivers of some fees, sales and other tax incentives, promotion of manufacturing or other commercial purposes, and development incentives for business and property owners, among several other spurs to economic development. The companion bills in the House and Senate are H 8119 and S 2989.