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Roger Williams University Cummings Institute holds third annual Real Estate Symposium

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Shown (from left) are: Margaret Everett, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, Master of Architecture student Joseph DePoalo, Master of Architecture student Rose Walsh, Issa Ramaji, executive director of the Cummings Institute for Real Estate at Roger Williams University, and Master of Architecture student Meghan Uluski.

Providence, RI Hundreds of leading experts in construction, planning, real estate, law, and sustainability gathered in Providence for the third annual Roger Williams University Cummings Institute for Real Estate Symposium. The April 10 event gave participants an opportunity to examine

the evolving nature of real estate development and explore lessons from the past while considering possibilities for the future.

“The Real Estate Symposium brings together industry leaders, alumni, and students to exchange ideas, explore career pathways, and highlight the dynamic, interdisciplinary nature of real estate today,” said Issa Ramaji, executive director of the Cummings Institute for Real Estate at RWU. “With online and in-person courses, immersive experiences like our recent New York City externship program, and a growing Real Estate Club of more than 100 students, RWU is building a vibrant and inclusive student community around real estate.”

RWU’s Real Estate Advisory Board helped coordinate two panel discussions, which delved into navigating increasingly complex development regulations while balancing compliance, along with the flexibility to meet evolving government expectations and societal priorities like housing affordability and sustainability.

In a candid and lively conversation, panelists unpacked the intricacies between public authority and private ambition. The panel, “The Intersection Between Government and Industry,” captured one of the symposium’s central themes: that sustainable and equitable development depends on genuine collaboration between sectors.

“A true win-win-win happens when the government, community, and private sector are aligned. Each has its own interests, but when all three are working together, that’s when deals succeed,” said Darcy Wilson, an infrastructure private equity investor. “Too often, we see public-sector proposals that are so fully baked by the time they’re shared, there’s no room left for partnership or adjustment. Successful projects require early and meaningful collaboration between the public and private sectors.”

The panelists didn’t shy away from the real-world challenges of making that collaboration work. Pamella Seay, president of Seay Law International and an elected official in Florida, reminded the audience of the government’s gatekeeping power, while Andrew Vasey, president & founder of Vasey Aviation Group, emphasized that no matter how experienced the players or well-crafted the deal, failure is always a risk. Yet the conversation remained optimistic. From rethinking zoning codes to embracing performance-based planning, panelists advocated for more transparent, honest, and future-focused partnerships that prioritize community outcomes without sacrificing economic viability.

In her remarks, Margaret Everett, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at RWU, emphasized the university’s collaborative and forward-thinking approach to real estate education. “This all started with a focus on creating programming for students, working closely with our Real Estate Board of Advisors to shape what the future of real estate demands. It’s exciting to see that vision come to life with students in our undergraduate, graduate certificate, and master’s programs, as well as those in business, architecture, engineering, and construction management, all engaging with our real estate curriculum and driving incredible momentum,” she said.

Delivering the opening remarks, James Andrade, senior vice president and head of learning & innovation at CapitaLand, spoke to the central role real estate plays in public discourse today. Andrade, a member of RWU's board of trustees, emphasized how Roger Williams University is a national leader in real estate education through the strength of its interdisciplinary programs and powerful combinations.

"RWU punches well above its weight, standing out nationally as one of only 14 universities with a distinctive blend of undergraduate and graduate programs in architecture, historic preservation, and business," he said. "Graduates of the Cummings Institute for Real Estate programming go on to lead in sustainable and equitable design, public policy, and fair housing advocacy, making a real impact across the real estate industry."

Keynote speaker Kairos Shen, chief of planning for the City of Boston, offered an insider's perspective on how urban transformation unfolds not only through policies, but also through negotiation, compromise, and cultural change. "One of the greatest privileges in my role has been navigating the practical constraints of policy and community engagement. Meaningful progress depends on a cultural shift within city government; we cannot expect change only from the development community without also changing ourselves."

The daylong program also featured 11 student research presentations from the Cummings School of Architecture that highlighted creative, sustainable solutions. All developed as part of adjunct professor Robert Rulli's Real Estate, Equity, and Environment course, students shared proposals that reflected the belief that municipalities can begin to solve regional housing issues by reimagining zoning and underutilized properties with access to public transportation and existing infrastructure.

First place was awarded to Grand Harbor Village, a proposal by Master of Architecture students Joseph DePoalo, Meghan Uluski, and Rose Walsh, which reimagines Newport's vacant casino site as a vibrant mixed-use development. Designed to enhance connectivity between the North End and downtown, the project includes diverse housing options, small business space, and an intermodal transportation hub.

"Winning first place was an incredible honor for our team, and presenting in front of professionals, faculty, and fellow peers was a valuable opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations," said Uluski of Natick, Mass. "Our research allowed us to apply what we've learned in class to real-world development scenarios just as Professor Rulli had prepared us to tackle projects we may see in our future careers."

The second-place project, Common Junction, reimagines a 12-acre site in North Kingstown, R.I., currently home to a Walmart, into a development that addresses environmental concerns and community needs while enhancing access to the nearby Wickford Junction Station. The project was developed by Marissa Lagoja, a Master of Architecture student from Derby, Conn., who is earning a Real Estate Development Certificate, and Juliet Vasey, a senior Preservation Studies major and Art & Architectural History minor from Indianapolis, who will begin her graduate studies in Real Estate Development at RWU this fall.

“Presenting our project to such a knowledgeable audience was both exciting and empowering, as it pushed us to think critically, communicate clearly, and respond thoughtfully under pressure,” Vasey said. “The experience deepened our understanding of the many layers of development, from zoning and financing to environmental impact and community needs, and affirmed how much we’ve grown throughout the semester.”

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