

Selling ideas and a grand vision

By David Ortiz, Staff Writer

Robert Leaver wants you to think outside the box. Leaver, the founding principal of New Commons Inc., a think tank and consulting firm in Providence, has built a business that tackles the thorny issues he says threaten Rhode Island's economic and social fabric.

New Commons is best known for its contributions to Providence's burgeoning creative economy. But it also has helped myriad organizations, corporations and cities and towns – in Rhode Island and beyond – to think about issues such as public transportation, managing health care costs as the baby boom ages, and how to make the development of affordable housing viable in a gentrifying market.

Leaver, a lifelong Rhode Island resident and longtime strategic consultant who founded Organizational Futures – the predecessor to New Commons – in 1982, lists among his close friends Christopher Bergstrom, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council; Thomas Deller, Providence's director of planning and development; and Richard Godfrey, executive director of Rhode Island Housing.

He founded New Commons in 2001, after several years during which, he said, he couldn't stop thinking about creating a forum that would enable businesses, governments, organizations and individuals to collaborate on building new, sustainable economic and community models in a global, post-industrial economy.

"I got more and more intrigued about ideas concerning community and place, and this idea of the New Common just occurred to me," Leaver said.

In 2005, Leaver and his partner, New Commons co-owner Michele Gonzalez – who, after 14 years working in public health, consults on project management, social marketing and behavior change – brought two new principals into their firm.



*PBN PHOTO BY STEPHANIE EWENS
ROBERT J. LEAVER, founder of New Commons, is a proponent of regional partnerships for food, transportation and other services.*

Larry Quick, a civic and corporate strategist from Australia with more than three decades' experience in economic and community development, specializes in applying complexity and whole-systems thinking to make cities, towns and regions "21st-century capable." He speaks regularly at creative economy conferences around the world.

Jeffrey Deckman, a serial entrepreneur who worked his way up the corporate ladder in the cable television industry before founding SyNet in 1987, was chairman of the Rhode Island Technology Council from 2000 to 2005, served on the Governor's Economic Policy Council from 2001 to 2005, and has strong ties to the Rhode Island Republican Party.

The four principals have worked on several planning initiatives in Providence and beyond. Among other projects, last fall New Commons was hired by the Rhode Island chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Providence Foundation and the Providence Preservation Society to help guide a process to gather public input on how land freed up by the relocation of Interstate 195 in Providence should be redeveloped.

Leaver is currently working with the Martha's Vineyard Commission and a steering committee to help draft a strategic and comprehensive plan for the island. And Quick is consulting on the Rhode Island Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research – an effort to turn the state into a hub for life-sciences research and education.

Though heavily focused on Rhode Island, Leaver is a proponent of building more regional partnerships to share municipal resources such as police and firefighting, create a light rail system and develop a regional food supply with urban and urban-fringe farms.

Leaver predicts that such measures will become increasingly important in sustaining a strong local economy in coming years, as the rising cost of fossil fuels makes the transportation of people and products more expensive. "We have huge issues about energy, and I don't know that our consciousness as a state is all the way there," he said.

And Leaver, who said he recently has been reading about the forces that came together to create the world's first democracy in ancient Greece, has plenty of ideas about how to re-create those forces in Providence.

He would like to see Kennedy Plaza and the Turk's Head Plaza redesigned to create better public gathering spaces. He advocates the creation of at-large seats on the Providence City Council, which he believes would enable members of the body to see a bigger picture than the needs of their respective ward fiefdoms. And he wants the city's public schools to begin teaching old-fashioned civics classes on voting and the machinations of democracy and government.

Published 01/20/2007

Issue 21-41