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Providence mayor Elorza unveils Woonasquatucket Vision Plan

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PROVIDENCE, RI Mayor Jorge Elorza joined congressman Jim Langevin, Department of Planning and Development director Bonnie Nickerson, Department of Art, Culture + Tourism (AC+T) director Stephanie Fortunato, representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council director of projects Lisa Aurecchia and community members to present the Woonasquatucket Vision Plan – a proposed vision for the rehabilitation of 560 acres along the Woonasquatucket River Corridor, extending from the Providence Place Mall to Olneyville Sq., that will transform the area into a mixed-use district using a combination of city initiatives and private investment.

“We’re thinking big about the role of the Woonasquatucket River Corridor; as a driver of economic growth entrepreneurship and creative industries and a source of energy connecting many city neighborhoods along the river from Fox Point to Olneyville,” said mayor Elorza. The Vision Plan provides a roadmap for the long-term growth for the corridor and was developed following a year-long, robust community engagement process facilitated by the City’s Department of Planning and Development with support from the EPA and community stakeholders. The plan focuses on several key goals including:

- Improving sustainability and resiliency
- Supporting and growing the existing economic clusters of arts, food based businesses and makers
- Preserving and creating affordable space
- Improving access to this district and connectivity within it
- Enhancing the public asset of the Woonasquatucket River.

“I commend mayor Elorza and the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council for laying out a comprehensive roadmap to reinvigorate the Woonasquatucket River Corridor,” said congressman Jim Langevin. The plan also identifies several catalytic redevelopment sites while posing several possible market-driven development scenarios and supports the creation of a pedestrian promenade to continue the riverwalk that runs through the downtown and west past the mall to connect downtown with the Woonasquatucket River Greenway.

“The Woonasquatucket Vision Plan establishes a framework for equitable and sustainable growth that supports residents, existing businesses and creative industries while encouraging the cleanup and smart reuse of Brownfield properties,” said Bonnie Nickerson, director of the Department of Planning and Development. “Building on the Woonasquatucket River as a major asset, our plan proposes bold ideas for public investments that will address pressing issues including flood mitigation, increasing transportation options and access to affordable spaces to live and work.”

Since the plan was completed, the city has already moved forward with its implementation through a \$300,000 EPA Brownfield-Assessment grant to help assess and develop remediation plans for community-prioritized Brownfields in the area while the Vision Plan itself was funded by a \$200,000 Brownfields Area-Wide Planning Grant. In addition, The city has also been awarded a \$100,000 grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to support the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Arts (WRGA), an initiative to integrate creative placemaking projects that will serve as a catalyst for future redevelopment efforts in the area.

“The Woonasquatucket River Greenway Arts partnership solidifies the long-standing work of transforming this industrial waterway into a cultural corridor with the arts at its core,” said Stephanie Fortunato, director of the Department of Art, Culture + Tourism. “The Valley’s incumbent creative sector has profoundly shaped community development in this area, and this brings together a coalition of engaged arts and civic leaders in a process that imagines new possibilities for residents to interact with the Valley’s cultural and natural resources and each other.”

AC+T and WaterFire Providence were jointly awarded the grant to support WRGA. The partners will convene collaborators to generate a series of performances and temporary public art works along the banks of Providence’s historic urban waterway in anticipation of the Woonasquatucket River Greenway extension project. The Manton Ave. Project and Wilbury Theatre Group will work with the history and built environment of the Woonasquatucket River Corridor to create performance and temporary art works will be curated by AC+T and WaterFire Providence in collaboration with the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, The Steel Yard and The Dirt Palace.

“25 years ago, Fred Lippitt and Jane Sherman imagined the Woonasquatucket River as a catalyst for revitalization a forgotten, degraded neighborhood, a remnant of the industrial revolution when the River was a source of power and a place to dump waste,” said Alicia Leher, executive director of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council. “They imagined the River as a place for recreation, building parks, the Woonasquatucket Greenway, a celebration of history and culture and a way of attracting economic investment. The Vision Plan is the next step in making the Woonasquatucket the focal point for making Providence beautiful, creative, healthy and exciting. For our part, the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council has worked to make sure that the plan includes climate resilience, enhancing the urban corridor and celebrating our connection to this life-giving River.”

While many of the older industrial buildings in the project area are underutilized, there has been notable redevelopment projects completed over the past two decades, bringing in anchor tenants and economic activity including: The Foundry, American Locomotive Works, Rising Sun Mills, The Plant, Eagle Sq., The Steel Yard, UNFI Headquarters, Waterfire Arts Center, West Exchange Center

and others. New construction has also helped to fill some vacant parcels, notably the 903 Residences and The Box Office. In addition to these recent projects, efforts are well underway to build on existing food production and distribution facilities in the corridor in the form of a new food hub operated by Farm Fresh Rhode Island at 489 Kinsley Ave. and urban greenhouse project Gotham Greens at 555 Harris Ave.

The Vision Plan will complement the work of other ongoing major infrastructure projects in the area including the reconstruction of the Rte. 6/10 interchange and a planned \$6 million project to transform the banks of the Woonasquatucket River between Eagle St. and Downtown into an attractive extension of the off-road Woonasquatucket River Greenway. Traffic calming projects that the plan proposes would assist in creating a safer way to travel in a busy through-way for multi-modal transportation use. These improvements will allow for the corridor and the surrounding infrastructure to support existing and new residents and businesses and increase their access to other neighborhoods in Providence.

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