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Mayor's message Streamlining zoning for I-95 development

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This month, the city of Providence took an important step forward to make development in Providence a more efficient, effective process. My team has set in motion a series of activities that will put into place a transparent and efficient process to create new comprehensive zoning and planning regulations for all of downtown Providence, with a special emphasis on maximizing the economic opportunities of land made available by the relocation of I-95.

Since work on the I-95 project began in earnest in 2002, city and state leadership have explored a series of ideas for fully maximizing the value of an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the Providence city skyline. This most recent effort will streamline the development process of the I-95 properties and reduce barriers to development of approximately 20 acres of property.

We have selected one of the world's top integrated design firms, Perkins+Will, to identify a preferred development scenario for the Providence Knowledge District, including the Jewelry District, the Hospital District and the I-95 parcels. The Perkins+Will team is conducting a study of the best zoning techniques and strategies to implement in the district. The city-led effort, which is expected to be completed in September, is funded by a federal appropriation from the U.S. Small Business Administration secured by R.I.'s Congressional delegation.

As part of this work, I will convene a group of public- and private-sector leaders to guide the process, including property owners and stakeholders from the business, higher education and healthcare communities. An advisory committee will provide feedback on broad development goals and policy issues that may impact the study area. A technical committee will review the finer details of the development options, including impacts to utilities, parking and transportation networks. Each committee is expected to have 20-25 members to ensure broad representation from across the community.

At the conclusion of this process, my administration, in coordination with city council leadership, will put in place a single, streamlined zoning and permitting process that will shorten the development cycle while ensuring properties are developed in ways that best serve Providence and the city's residents.

Currently, building projects need the approval of as many as four independent boards in certain parts of the city, including the City Plan Commission, the Zoning Board of Review, the Downcity Design Review Committee and the Historic District Commission, all of which have overlapping oversight and often operate without sufficient coordination. The result is an approval process that requires developers to appear and reappear before the various boards numerous times and often takes months to complete.

The relocation of I-95 is an incredible opportunity for Providence to attract new businesses, open up new revenue-generating, taxable property, and build a stronger economy in Providence. Too often, the efforts of entrepreneurs, business owners and developers get caught up in bureaucratic

red tape that has a chilling effect on growth and investment in the city. We will conduct a thorough stakeholder review, with the guidance and expertise of a nationally respected consultant, to arrive at a comprehensive and streamlined set of planning and zoning regulations that create a predictable, well-designed path for future development in the Capital City. This process will create the much-needed foundation upon which the vision for the Knowledge District can be efficiently and effectively executed.

A public kickoff meeting, as well as the first meetings of the Advisory and Technical Committees, will be announced in the coming weeks.

Angel Taveras is the mayor of Providence.

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