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Mayor's message: Storefront improvement program

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Last month, I had the honor of presenting my fourth and final State of the City address to the people of Providence. In that address, I spoke of where we are today and how far we have come in just three short years.

From a \$110 million inherited deficit and the brink of bankruptcy to a \$1.6 million surplus, we have shored up our fiscal foundation and built stronger partnerships with colleges and universities, hospitals and non-profits, unions and retirees and residents and our workers. Last spring, even as we continued our work to close the budget deficit, I announced a comprehensive economic development action plan for our city. The action plan is called "Putting Providence Back to Work," and it has 20 action steps designed to jumpstart our community. With more than half a billion dollars in new construction and investment these past three years, we have made progress but we still have work to do.

We have frozen our commercial tax rate and expedited permitting - including hosting a state-of-the-art online and expedited permitting process. We've helped small businesses increase access to low-interest loans through our overhauled Providence Economic Development Partnership, and demonstrated to our business community that we are a good place in which to invest, with an award-winning quality of life, proximity to major metropolitan markets, and immediate access to all forms of transportation.

Among the recommendations I made in my action plan, was the creation of a Storefront Improvement Program - to provide matching grants to small business owners for exterior facing improvements, such as lighting, new windows and doors, signage or security, or planters and awnings. The mission is to attract new customers to our shops and businesses, grow sales and revenue, and increase the viability of the business and the potential for new jobs for area workers. An added bonus is an improved quality of life within our neighborhoods.

This month, I will be launching this initiative, which has proven successful in other cities nationwide and will be a valuable tool here, in Providence. By providing matching grants up to \$10,000 to business owners, we will help these small businesses leverage scant resources to improve the appearance of their businesses, while encouraging others nearby to follow suit. We expect to help at least 25 business owners throughout our city's commercial corridors make needed improvements to their businesses and to strengthen their economic base and that of our city, and we are eagerly awaiting the results.

For more information visit www.providenceri.com/economic-development.

Angel Taveras is the mayor of Providence.