



CELEBRATING
55 YEARS

nerej

Providence - It's time to offer more in the city

July 10, 2014 - Rhode Island

It is like nothing you've ever seen before. As night falls upon the city of Providence 100 fires burn just above the surface of the three rivers that pass through the middle of downtown in Waterplace Park. A couple rides a gondola along the Providence River as orange flames reflect off the water creating a dazzling sight through out the entire city. The crowd in attendance, consisting of tourists and locals, makes up nearly 100,000 people. All are invited to walk the riverfront, where they enjoy the exquisiteness of the pirouetting flames, the scent of sweet-smelling wood smoke, the altering outlines of volunteer fire tenders, and music from around the globe - each of which fills the senses and emotions of all who wander the paths of Waterplace Park. This is WaterFire in Providence, created by Barnaby Evans in 1994 as a vision to revitalize the nightlife within the city.

It's a brilliant foundation in reinvigorating Providence's nightlife. For those of us working on the next step, it is time to look at building on the WaterFire foundation with a full slate of activity both in the evening and daytime to create a dynamic programmed urban core. The number of days of late sunsets and warm temperatures is so short in New England. We are looking to make every one of them count, to offer a destination activity, theatrical show, musical event, culinary experience, on each of the days and nights from June through September.

Take Boston as an example - in recent years the city adopted a motto "Think More." More hours were added to the T service for late night travelers and more bars and restaurants were added with later hours of operation. Boston added more craft breweries, more food trucks, more pop-up art shows, more parklets, more concert venues, more car services, more hotels, and more parks. The result was more people, more money, and more economic stimulation.

In Providence, the 19 acres of developable land and 8 acres of parks that make up The LINK provide an opportunity to increase the urban core by at least 33%. The 195 Redevelopment Commission is currently reviewing the first round of proposals for development. The LINK is expected to attract mixed-use development that includes offices, retail, residences and hospitality. Businesses want to be where the talented employees want to be. Providence offers beauty, history, art and food - more activities, more fun, more ways to connect people, will incentivize the businesses to locate here.

Already Providence has much to offer. It is geographically blessed - a seaport at the head of Narragansett Bay, rivers running into the urban center the city spreads over a topographical basin enclosed by four gently curving hills- each with distinct neighborhoods. One of the oldest of America's cities, Providence has a special sense of place, a unique physical character evocative of its 350-year history. It offers big city amenities in a small, accessible setting.

The challenge now is to make the next great jump in the city's evolution. Moving the highway, creating The LINK is part of that evolution. Creating a year round, day in and day out environment that invites and amuses is also part of the evolution.

The Project for Public Spaces rightly focuses on several key factors that are important to developing and sustaining a fully programmed city. They are: flexible design, sophisticated management, integration with transit systems, activity during all seasons and diverse, secure funding sources.

The project highlights a "...rolling stretch of grass and paths winding from one end of a park to the other that simultaneously hosts picnickers, kite-flyers, dog walkers, little leaguers, strolling observers, frisbee tossers, and huge, informal soccer matches. In other areas, there are volleyball games and drummers circles sharing space with family barbecues and outdoor markets."

All this doesn't happen by accident. Strategic programming draws people into the city and encourages them to linger and invites them to join those who chose urban living. Programming combines the best of public and private sectors, including private sector efforts such as concerts, sporting events and performances all augmented by museums, stores, coffee shops, and outdoor food and flower carts. It all combines to form a hub, a center of activity.

We already know that Providence can attract visitors; our convention center has already booked over 300 events for next year. Tourists come to dine on some of the world's best cuisine, to ponder in the library where Edgar Allen Poe sat, and to stroll in the night air as the fires light up the water.

What's next? The planning is beginning and with a firm commitment to strategic programming, Providence is poised take its place as a thriving urban environment. And that doesn't hurt when it comes to attracting developers to The LINK. A strong city, one with people living and working, feeds a strong economy and the cycle of growth begins.

Jan Brodie is executive director of I-195 Redevelopment District Commission, Providence, R.I.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540