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DiPrete Engineering putting the pieces together to invigorate blighted shopping plazas

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There was a time when big-box retailers placed shopping plazas off of heavily traveled roads. The economy was robust, business was good, and consumers filled their vehicles with packages, driving off to new homes in the suburbs.

That was the past.

Falling victim to an unforgiving economic landscape, many big-box retailers consolidated, moved, went online, or shut their doors entirely. The result is now playing out in the form of underutilized, vacant and blighted shopping plazas.

There is hope, however, as developers are discovering the opportunity to tap into pent up consumer demand by creating a new shopping experience. Smaller shops - be they mom and pop retailers or national chains - are clamoring for smaller, more quaint space. Shoppers want to experience music, arts and hearty landscaping. They want a diverse mix of stores, helpful signage, outdoor seating and more.

Above all, today's consumer wants the ability to explore these things. Making them feel comfortable doing so is an investment sure to provide a healthy return. Consider the following:

- * Remove barriers that make spaces feel dark and hidden
- * Balance parking with tenant needs; parking areas can be made inviting by adding landscaped areas that break up large expanses of asphalt
- * Add way-finding signs, music and decorative lighting to encourage walking
- * Include outdoor seating, play areas, art, shade vs. sun areas.

Today, developers are following trends that skew towards an urban core. With fewer homes being constructed in the suburbs, vacant shopping plazas in urban areas hold limitless potential.

Those in their 20s and 30s are becoming less reliant on vehicles to perform daily tasks. They look for walkability and variety which can be difficult to achieve in a suburban or rural setting. This is when redevelopment of blighted, abandoned or underutilized parcels becomes enticing. Over the years, we've learned how to make redevelopment successful while keeping costs down.

Some of DiPrete's redevelopment tools include:

- * Adding pad sites in expanses of parking that is not used
- * Creating designs that preserve existing stormwater systems and utilities
- * Keeping demolition of existing buildings to a minimum
- * Increasing landscaped area
- * Looking for public-private partnerships (TIF's, tax treaties, zoning concessions and special zoning, expedited approvals).

DiPrete Engineering works with property owners and developers to think outside of the box. The firm is equipped to enter the development process at virtually any point and to handle the myriad of

issues that inevitably occur.

Rhode Island's Garden City Shopping Center, located in Cranston is a great example of pieces coming together in the commercial development scene. The key to its prosperity has long been its willingness to change.

The state's premier outdoor shopping venue is now executing a multi-phased strategy to expand, reconfigure and redevelop itself. The vision originated with The Wilder Companies of Boston, who teamed with DiPrete Engineering for Garden City's early design stage through its engineering and construction. DiPrete Engineering continues to find success in redeveloping sites in R.I. and Mass. such as Bald Hill Rd. in Warwick where a regional mall is being repositioned, and the largest Brewed Awakenings coffee shop in Rhode Island will replace a former Land Rover dealership. Also, the 40 acres of developable waterfront land in East Providence, where a former petroleum shipping terminal is being transformed into a traditional New England-style residential waterfront community called Kettle Point.

On the busy Hartford Ave. in Johnston, another success story is being written. For the better part of two decades, the former Stuart's Plaza has been vacant, standing as a daily reminder to thousands of motorists of an economy gone stagnant. Where many saw uncertainty, professionals at DiPrete Engineering saw opportunity. The area, now named Johnston Towne Centre, has witnessed the renovation and demolition of the long, empty buildings. Saletin Real Estate Group's new vision for the site will put the center of town back on the map. DiPrete Engineering and Saletin have also used this model in the redevelopment of a former K-Mart site in Seekonk, Mass.

Properties that sit vacant for this long are not redeveloped overnight. The project was guided by DiPrete Engineering through an innovative Tax Increment Financing (TIF) process which helped create a TIF District. TIF is a method of financing the public costs associated with a private development project. TIF bonds are issued and used to build the public features of a project, such as roads, parks, or utilities. The bonds are paid off from the increase in property taxes.

"This is an incredibly enticing method for redevelopment, as cities and towns are lacking the funds to complete the work, and developers are looking to finance projects during a time when private equity can be a challenge," said DiPrete. "The cost of construction is always a major factor, but if efficiently recycled, these old shopping centers can bring desirable retail space to the market for a fraction of the new construction costs"

Johnston Town Centre represents a movement that has property owners and commercial developers recognizing an economic reality: it makes more sense to reposition an existing parcel than to develop a new one.

DiPrete Engineering knows that the ability to look past a vacant property and realize its potential means to be bold and willing to put the pieces together.

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