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A sense of urgency, incentives and public-private partnerships

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As the new chairman of the 195 Redevelopment Commission I strongly believe the time to act is now. The parcels made available in Providence with the relocation of I-195, represent a unique opportunity to demonstrate the Rhode Island's ability to renew and revitalize itself by creating a vibrant urban mixed-use environment. The national economy is strong, interest rates are low, Rhode Island and Providence have new administrations able to make a fresh start, and local employers are looking for opportunities to upgrade or grow their businesses.

Experience has demonstrated that successful urban redevelopment and revitalization requires a collaborative "public-private partnership," which includes the active participation of the state and the city governments, local business, educational and medical institutions and community groups. Each has a role to play. Today, there must be a sense of urgency from all participants to work to make the development a success.

A key element is having the tools to form partnerships and attract investment. In this regard, the economic initiatives, incentives and financing tools in the FY 2016 budget proposed by Governor Gina Raimondo are absolutely vital. The governor proposes a \$25 million 195 Development Fund. This state incentive pool will be used to attract other capital to the I-195 land and will be used strategically to supplement other sources of capital such as private mortgage debt and equity investment, real estate tax credit financing, tax increment financing and other funding sources. We believe that a public-private mix of funding will help us attract anchors to the site as well as fill project gaps to get construction going. We also need to be focused on spending the money in order to create a catalytic effect that stimulates additional development and economic activity in the state. In addition, the FY 2016 budget proposal focuses on targeted workforce development, supports small businesses and provides access to capital for growing businesses (especially in research and development in key industry sectors). The proposed Anchor Institution Tax Credit provides incentives for the state's committed companies to draw their suppliers, affiliates and customers to the ocean state.

Governor Raimondo and Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza have articulated a vision of innovation and economic activity on the I-195 land that stems from partnerships with existing knowledge-based institutions as well as the attraction of new enterprises. Key universities, medical centers, and businesses have already made significant investments in the area. Successful redevelopment initiatives in other metropolitan areas have demonstrated that economic development builds upon the strengths of local economic stakeholders. We are in the process of analyzing our assets and developing a strategy regarding the innovations, institutions, and industries we should emphasize in and attract to this corridor of land. We also aim to create a bustling 24/7 live/work/play environment in this (to date) underutilized area.

We are fortunate to have the I-195 land and that it is "shovel ready." On the approximately 20 acres of developable land, we have the potential to build millions of square feet over time. That's a lot of space and it can accommodate most corporate or institutional tenants and a mix of exciting uses. Thus, we have the land, we have an excellent "keystone" location in the center of Providence, we have local businesses and institutions that need to grow in knowledge-based industries, and, with the passing of the governor's budget including the economic incentives package, we should be in a strong position to compete for new development and employment opportunities.

Joseph Azrack is the chairman of the I-195 Redevelopment Commission, Providence, R.I.

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