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East Providence takes innovative approach in selling surplus property - by Patrick Hanner and David Bachrach

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The city of East Providence is taking proactive measures to ensure that the sale of its surplus properties will provide flexibility for developers while at the same time encourage uses that can revitalize a commercial corridor. As an example, an approximate 19,000 s/f parcel on Bullocks Point Ave. at the intersection of Fenner Ave. in Riverside is for sale by the city and prior to advertising the

sale of the property, the city amended its zoning ordinance to create an overlay district to allow for a mixed-use development that is intended to encourage a combination of uses such as housing, retail, civic uses or art studios. The goal is to encourage economic and social vitality while providing flexibility for developers by allowing for a higher density residential development. A compact high density residential development could support the existing retail stores of the immediate area, which in the case of Riverside has experienced several vacancies and a number of underutilized properties since the last recession. The overlay district also encourages a formal linkage to the East Bay Bike Path, one of the most popular bike paths of the state, and allows the street frontage to be treated as a public space with streetscape enhancements to promote public transit and provide for safe pedestrian travel.

While there is a stable market demand for single-family dwellings built in traditional post WWII residential neighborhoods, which are commonly found throughout the city in areas such as Rumford, Kent Heights and Riverside, there is also a market demand for new options of housing. Recent national trends of a mobile workforce, a green environment, empty nesters and an aging population living longer and wanting a more active lifestyle, suggest that there is a need for walkable, mixed-use and high density developments located on or near public transportation lines. An online community survey conducted by the Planning Department several years ago asked residents of the type of housing that they believe is most needed in the city. Of the respondents, 24% would like to see more single-family homes, 20% wanted to see more housing for seniors, 18% live/work options and 19% wanted housing that is in walking distance to work, shopping and recreation facilities. The responses to the survey suggest that while there is a demand for single-family homes located in traditional residential neighborhoods, there is also a market for a diversity of housing types that include mixed-use pedestrian friendly developments that are in walking distance to work, retail stores and recreation activities.

Providing flexibility for developers to increase the density that would not be permissible under current zoning, buildings on a zero front lot line, commercial and retail on the street level, off-street parking to the rear of the structures and pedestrian amenities such as covered bus stops and formal pedestrian linkages is a tool to revitalize the city's commercial corridors while providing a diversity of housing choices for the city's residents.

Proposals from firms interested in purchasing the Fenner Ave./Bullocks Point Ave. property are due on February 1, 2018 and detail bid instructions can be found at www.eastprovidence.com.

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