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## **Downtown enhancements planned for Riverside Square and Watchemoket Square - by William Fazioli**

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Vibrant downtown districts are vital to the economic fabric of any community. Like many places, East Providence's downtown areas have experienced dramatic changes in recent decades as a result of shifts in the buying habits of Americans and other competitive factors that have led to the decline of traditional, local businesses that serve the community.

Increased vacancy contributes to blight and can create the perception of a depressed economy in any community, even if that community is experiencing economic growth in other sectors. While East Providence has exhibited healthy economic growth in a variety of sectors including healthcare, finance and advanced manufacturing, the need to promote investment and vibrancy in our downtown districts remains a critical goal of the city.

East Providence has been the recipient of several significant grants that will help to promote economic investment in the downtown districts, encourage small business start-ups and advance the desirability and sense of place for two important areas in the city.

The Riverside Square and Watchemoket Square districts have each received funding from Rhode Island Commerce Corp. under its Main St. program for streetscape improvements that will not only improve the aesthetics of these areas, but will also help to promote small business investment and increased public activity. These grants will be used to complete a variety of physical enhancements including landscaping, way-finding signage, decorative banners, lighting and other improvements that will create a more welcoming downtown environment for both residents and visitors.

The improvements will seek to highlight the distinctive features of each area. In addition to these physical enhancement funds, Watchemoket Sq. has also received Economic Development Administration (EDA) funding to complete a study that will lead to recommendations for making the area safer for pedestrians and bicyclists, more desirable for small business investment – especially in the areas of arts and entertainment for our creative community – and improved public transit. In addition, the study will include recommendations that will help create a broader range of connections to the city's waterfront and the very successful and expanding concert venue at Bold Point.

While these funding sources are relatively small, these measures will help to leverage new investment in our downtown areas and help attract businesses that are now in high demand, including restaurants, cafés, galleries and apartments. East Providence will continue to seek funding opportunities that will support continued downtown investment and the encouragement of a vibrant

mixed-use environment that will be enjoyed by our residents and visitors.

Those interested in learning more about the economic development activities occurring in East Providence are encouraged to visit the city's economic development website at [www.eastprovidencebusiness.com](http://www.eastprovidencebusiness.com) or the city's Waterfront District website at [www.eastprovidencewaterfront.com](http://www.eastprovidencewaterfront.com) or contact the Department of Planning and Economic Development.

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