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Downtown overlay districts help foster economic vitality and investment - by William Fazioli

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William Fazioli,
City of East Providence

Last month's article stressed the importance of vibrant downtown districts and their contribution to the economic fabric of any community. Recently obtained grant funds to physically improve Riverside Sq. and Watchemoket Sq. play an important part in making our downtowns more visually appealing, easier to navigate for visitors and more apt to promote entrepreneurial investment based on the downtown area's visual desirability.

As it relates to encouraging private investment in downtown districts, efficient and effective land use permitting can also play a vital role in promoting new investment in our commercial Main St. districts. Based on a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case in 1926, traditional Euclidian Zoning, instituted a practice of applying strict land use assignments to designated zoning district categories which has been the basis for local planning efforts for almost 100 years. However, this approach has increasingly been viewed as stifling and rigid in light of growing land development challenges particularly in the case of our Main St. corridor as a result of rapid changes in retail shopping habits, housing preferences and evolving choices of transportation alternatives.

As a result of the dynamic shifts in these aspects of urban life there has been an emerging trend in planning to adopt land use codes with a more flexible, form-based framework where a variety of land uses are encouraged to coexist together in a manner that supports economic investment and new residential development directly on these important economic corridors. In fact, recent research indicates that a diverse mix of uses in a neighborhood can spur interaction among residents which can ultimately result in greater exchange of knowledge and ideas.

The city is addressing these trending conditions with changes to our zoning ordinance that foster and support mixed-use development along our important Main St. corridors. The city has already developed special zoning overlay districts on our Taunton Ave. and Riverside Sq. corridors. These overlay districts provide flexibility and promote the development of mixed-use investments that provide for a variety of vibrant uses that can coexist together, including multifamily residential, retail, office and a variety of service uses that directly serve nearby residents such as restaurants, cafés, galleries and a whole host of other uses.

East Providence is proceeding with plans to further expand on its mixed use overlay districts on other critical corridors in our city, including the Waterman Ave. and Warren Ave. corridors, Six Corners, and the portions of the Pawtucket Ave. and Broadway business corridors. These overlay districts will be completed in the coming months and will provide additional incentive for developers to invest in East Providence and promote more vibrant downtown corridors that contribute to the economic vitality of East Providence.

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 or the city's Waterfront District website at www.eastprovidencewaterfront.com or contact the department of planning and economic development.

William Fazioli is the director of planning and economic development for the City of East Providence, R.I.

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