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East Providence proposes improvements to existing zoning regulations - by William Fazioli

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He who hesitates loses. Prior to COVID-19 certain social trends were already impacting economic development decisions. Post COVID-19 these patterns have accelerated and continue to become even more amplified. Now more than ever communities must act to map out a strategy early in the economic recovery to fully leverage the opportunities at hand. A key component of this process is to reexamine a community's local zoning code.

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The pandemic has had a lasting impact on work preferences, the demand for office space and other commercial space including local retail. Often existing zoning regulations can inhibit successful adaptive reuse of properties which can stymie long term growth.

The inflexibility of land use regulations can restrict the ability of property owners to react quickly to market trends. If unaddressed the outcome of overly restrictive policies will be a series of vacant underutilized buildings occupying central corridors. This often leads to a downward spiral of decline, further disinvestment and ultimately abandonment.

Mixed-use zoning has emerged as a smart choice for communities looking to revitalize tired central business districts. Expanding the by right use of properties allows owners to adapt their properties to more productive and profitable uses. Flexible zoning ordinances can create activity centers which promote better connectivity and walkability. Increased density leads to more environmentally friendly land use and reduces reliance on car dependency. In addition, progressive zoning regulations can promote new residential alternatives, especially affordable housing units.

East Providence is proposing sweeping improvements to its current zoning regulations. These improvements are targeted to entice investment in the city's older central business districts. Many parcels located in these areas are underutilized due to outdated land use policies. By introducing mixed-use zoning overlays, the permitted uses for these properties will be greatly expanded. This will enable property owners the opportunity to develop sites in smart ways that reflect current real estate trends.

The city has collaborated with regional developers and community stakeholders to draft a set of

policies which are designed to attract in-fill development in older commercial corridors. The new regulations will allow for residential, office and retail structures to occupy street fronts in the same development. Sample permitted uses include live/workspace, small scale artisans, design studio and multi-family housing. Further, lower minimum parking requirements will encourage better connectivity for pedestrians & bicycle users. Mixed-use zoning will also require lower capital investments for communities since it will utilize existing transportation, water and sewer infrastructure systems.

Lastly, as more employers offer remote working arrangements to employees, local leaders should prepare to provide workers with options outside their homes to do their jobs. As the virus recedes and public health conditions improve, workers will relish the flexibility to work in coffee shops, libraries, public parks, or in rented flex spaces. A goal of these reforms is to create mixed-use corridors that provide workers with attractive public and private gathering places as well as accessible transit hubs of the “new normal” economy.

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