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Public art helping spur economic growth in East Providence's Watchemoket Square - by Johanna Walczak

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Investment in public art is an investment in the future growth and vitality of a city. There is broad consensus within urban planning and design that public art adds significant economic, cultural, and community value to a place. Murals, sculptures, and other art forms contribute to community building, identity development and place making to improve the vibrancy and quality of life for both residents and visitors. It also adds financial value to a place, promoting community and economic development, attracting businesses, new housing, and tourism.

In East Providence, public art is being used as a complementary strategy to spur economic growth in Watchemoket Sq., alongside significant investments in infrastructure, housing, and commercial real estate. Watchemoket Sq. was historically the commercial center of East Providence but experienced dislocation through the construction of I-195 and subsequent disinvestment. Watchemoket Sq. is now the focus of significant reinvestment with the development of 34 units of new housing at the Residences at Bold Point, redevelopment of the former historic Oddfellows Hall on Warren Ave., and thriving new restaurants and entertainment venues. Future construction of an I-195 off-ramp to Waterfront Dr. will improve access to Watchemoket Sq. and the Waterfront District.

Watchemoket is also the focal point of the city's nascent public art program, as a key gateway to the Waterfront District and newly established Arts District. The official Arts District designation, created in 2021 through state enabling legislation, provides state income tax relief to artists who live in the district.

Dedicated funding through a line item in the city's capital budget is supporting several new public art initiatives in Watchemoket Sq. including the lease of a prominent sculpture. Selection of the sculpture is currently underway, and installation of the piece is anticipated later this winter. Funds are also being used, with additional grant support, to fabricate three custom structures that will house interchangeable panels for rotating art exhibitions curated by the East Providence Arts Council under the leadership of Jennifer Gillooly Cahoon. Designed to resemble lanterns by local artist Rich Watrous and built by Rumford-based Amaral Fabrications, the structures will create a public art trail through the Watchemoket Arts District. City public art funding is also providing matching funds for a Rhode Island Foundation grant secured by the Arts Council to commission a mural in Watchemoket Sq. in 2022.

These investments in public art are modest expenditures but do yield a high rate of return on their economic impact on the city, through increased property values, occupancy rates, commercial activity, and tourism. They also have a significant impact on values that are harder to measure but more readily felt, enhancing the urban landscape and improving the quality of life to make East Providence a more attractive place to live, work, and play. As the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the vulnerability of the arts sector to economic downturns, it has also reminded us of the intrinsic value of strengthening the social fabric of communities and building connectedness, which the arts and culture contribute to significantly.

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