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## **Warwick's new city hall plaza will reinvigorate existing businesses - by Frank Picozzi**

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Frank Picozzi

A pedestrian plaza. An ice skating rink. A roller rink. A splash pad. An outdoor event space for dances, concerts, food truck nights, recreational activities and so much more – all taking place in the heart of historic Apponaug Village. These family-friendly, community-based activities will soon become a reality, thanks in part to a \$5 million federal grant secured for the city of Warwick by U.S. senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse, and supported by additional ARPA monies allocated to the city.

The new city hall plaza will be constructed directly in back of city hall, in the place where the former municipal annex building stood before a flood several years ago led to significant structural damage that resulted in the decision to demolish the building. On the site will be the ice skating rink, which will transform into the plaza during warmer months. The project plans also call for parking lot improvements; new concrete curbing to define parking areas and pedestrian walks; new paver walks and plaza areas; installation of entry, informational, and interpretive wayfinding signage; construction of a new building for concessions, skate rental, mechanicals room, and restrooms; construction of an ADA-accessible walk and landing area; and installation of new landscaping and site adornments, including benches, electric vehicle charging stations, trash receptacles, bike racks, and lighting.

In addition to the many amenities and aesthetic improvements resulting from the project, the city hall plaza project will also create construction jobs, help to support and reinvigorate existing businesses that continue their recovery from the economic devastation resulting from the pandemic, and help to attract new companies to the area. It's expected that, over time, the project will also lead to the creation of additional local jobs, as merchants and restaurateurs add staff to accommodate potential new customers who will visit the plaza for special recreational, cultural, and community events. Further, the pandemic has raised awareness of the value of outdoor spaces and the great benefit of affordable recreational and cultural opportunities for individuals and families alike. Both area residents and out-of-town guests will be able to enjoy a myriad of year-round, family-friendly activities at little to modest cost – something that is increasingly important as prices continue to rise, adding additional financial burden to everyone, and, particularly, to working families and seniors on fixed incomes.

The city hall plaza will also build on the momentum that's been seen throughout the historic village, which has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years. The Apponaug Circulator project has made the area more pedestrian friendly while including environmental and landscaping improvements, designated bike lanes make it safer for cyclists to travel throughout the Village, and renovations to the historic "sawtooth" mill building have preserved a structure that's historically significant to the area.

The site and accessibility improvements to the General George Sears Greene cemetery have attracted more visitors to Apponaug, and local restaurants, retail and service businesses have made significant façade and other facility improvements, which have had a very positive impact on the area as a whole.

This summer, roughly a dozen municipal offices, which are currently scattered throughout the city, will move into leased space in the sawtooth alongside new AAA Northeast offices, further revitalizing the area and bringing additional patrons to local establishments. The Warwick Center for the Arts, housed in the former Kentish Armory and located in the same National Register of Historic Places Warwick Civic Center as City Hall and the adjacent Henry Warner Apponaug Library Branch, is also making significant accessibility and aesthetic improvements.

This is an exciting time for our community and the residents and businesses who make up the rich fabric of our community. If you'd like to learn about all Warwick can offer to help your business succeed, please call the Department of Economic Development at (401) 738-2014 or email [econ.dir@warwickri.com](mailto:econ.dir@warwickri.com).

Frank Picozzi is the mayor of the city of Warwick, R.I.

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