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East Providence amends zoning ordinance for mixed-use category - by Roberto DaSilva

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In December of 2022, the city amended the East Providence zoning ordinance to increase the productive use of commercial buildings. The adopted amendments to the zoning ordinance allow for mixed-use in all commercial districts, reduced parking requirements for office and retail uses, and allows for increased density in areas allowing multi-family housing. Together, the recently adopted zoning amendments will put preexisting, nonconforming buildings back into productive use, provide additional commercial amenities to residents, and strengthen the city's tax base.

The adopted amendments to the city's zoning ordinance add a "mixed-use" category to the use schedule to allow the combination of commercial and residential uses on a single parcel in all commercial districts. The mixed-use category was previously only allowed in mixed-use overlay districts. Now, vacant buildings previously used for a single, outdated economic use can be revitalized into a first-floor commercial use with residential units on the floors above. Allowing for multiple uses on a single parcel creates more walkable and vibrant commercial districts, which better serve residents and business owners alike.

The adopted amendments also reduce the minimum off-street parking spaces required for office uses, retail and service business establishments, convenience stores, restaurants, and fast food restaurants. While developers constructing buildings for these uses may provide parking spaces in excess of the city's minimum requirements, a reduction in the number of off-street spaces required is intended to result in less impervious surface, better storm water management, and lower environmental impacts from development. A reduction in the required off-street parking spaces provides for a more efficient use of land as opposed to excessive surface level parking lots.

In addition to addressing parking, the amendments also reduce the usable lot area required in areas that allow multi-family dwellings. This amendment allows more units to be included in a multi-family structure on a single parcel, allowing for increased housing units in areas of the city most appropriate for higher densities, along existing infrastructure and adjacent to public amenities.

The amendments to the use schedule of the ordinance also reduce the cost of doing business in East Providence by allowing more uses in commercial districts, providing more flexibility to property owners. The changes will effectively prevent many prospective businesses from needing zoning relief for their project, which is often a hurdle for small businesses seeking to occupy older commercial buildings built prior to the adoption of the city's zoning ordinance.

The implementation of environmental and economic-friendly land use policies through updates to the zoning ordinance provide for a more efficient use of land in the city. The amendments promote mixed-use commercial districts occupied with modern economic uses as well as the production of additional housing units. The modernized zoning ordinance replaces mandates of excessive asphalt parking lots with regulations that enable the productive commercial and residential use of formerly vacant buildings, providing flexibility to small businesses and increasing the city's tax base.

Roberto DaSilva is the mayor of the city of East Providence, R.I.

