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City of East Providence promotes outdoor dining accommodations - by Roberto DaSilva

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Roberto DaSilva

Not all economic development or placemaking projects require years of planning or design to create a high impact on our main streets. One simple and effective solution is to create walkable and enjoyable environments on traditional “main street” areas through outdoor dining accommodations. These are the traditional, pedestrian-scaled areas that are the heart of communities throughout New England – from large cities to small villages. What started as a short-term solution to the COVID-19 pandemic turned into a concept which has been shown to increase walkability on these main streets. This is why the city of East Providence has worked to promote outdoor accommodations for our main street areas. Space that was once underutilized, is now being used to expand outdoor dining or improve community gathering spaces.

It’s clear that the positive impact outdoor dining has had on small businesses and city main streets is significant. As a result of two successful years of permitting temporary outdoor dining, the city is working towards crafting policies that will allow temporary outdoor accommodations on a permanent basis in the appropriate commercial areas. These policy updates will provide more opportunity for both commercial property owners and small businesses. Allowing outdoor accommodations will expand the capacity of businesses, increase the number of feasible uses of buildings, and organically create vibrancy on our main streets.

In conjunction with promoting outdoor accommodations for small businesses, the city is also connecting small businesses with the resources they need to make physical improvements to their buildings. The city received \$150,000 from Commerce Rhode Island as a part of the state’s “Take It Outside” initiative to assist small businesses in expanding their outdoor uses and accommodations. This program provides grants to individual businesses in amounts up to \$10,000 for outdoor accommodations such as chairs, tables, and heat lamps. This direct financial support to small businesses expanding and enhancing their outdoor accommodations provides additional opportunities for increased revenue and allows businesses to utilize their space more efficiently. Twenty percent of “Take It Outside” initiative funds have been specifically allocated to businesses owned by women (WBE) and minorities (MBE).

In addition to “Take It Outside”, the city was recently awarded \$300,000 from Commerce Rhode Island to reimburse small businesses making ventilation and air quality improvements to their buildings. This money will provide reimbursements up to \$10,000 on specific HVAC installations, repairs, air purifiers, windows, and other projects that help increase indoor air quality. This ventilation support initiative helps commercial property owners and small businesses lower the cost of installation of any HVAC work done in their commercial buildings.

East Providence is fostering a more walkable, vibrant main street environment by supporting outdoor accommodations for small businesses both legislatively and financially. By supporting small businesses in their endeavors to improve the quality of their built environment, the business community, city, and public benefit from more active and beautiful spaces.

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

