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City meets and on a mission to exceed 10% affordable housing goal - by Roberto DaSilva

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East Providence residents have long known that the city represents an excellent balance of affordability and quality of life with close proximity to the heart of the Providence metro area. The city has proven to be a desirable place to live and do business as evidenced by several significant developments bringing new housing to the community. With the trend of high housing demand continuing, residents of the city and region are feeling the pressure of rising rents and homeownership costs. The city, however, and its development partners are proactively taking steps to address this issue.

Rhode Island law requires that each community maintain a minimum of 10% of its housing units as affordable to low-to-moderate income households. The city accomplished this goal in 2021 as one of only seven municipalities to reach 10%. One outcome of this accomplishment, is that the city is no longer subject to the “comprehensive permit” process, which entitles developers to not comply with local zoning regulations. The city, however, recognizes that when it comes to the issue of housing affordability, 10% is not enough. The country and region are in the midst of a housing crisis, mostly due to unmet demand for new housing, and many households are struggling to meet housing costs. Recent inflation of goods and services, and rising interest rates have also exacerbated this problem. In 2021, 49% of the city’s renters, and 27% of homeowners were considered “cost burdened.” While home prices in the state increased by 71% between 2012 and 2020, household incomes only increased by 19% during the same period.

The city of East Providence recognizes that affordable housing is serving as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization in the city. The city’s nonprofit partners are responsible for several developments that are currently under construction or in the planning stages. These include the Residents at Riverside Sq. – 16 affordable units currently under construction by ONE Neighborhood Builders on a formerly abandoned brownfield in Riverside. ONE Neighborhood Builders is also beginning the permitting process for redevelopment of a vacant building at 350 Taunton Ave., which will include 160 units of affordable housing. In addition, NeighborWorks Blackstone Valley is set to begin construction of Ivy Place. This project will include nine new affordable workforce units that will infill a gap in the heart of the Taunton Ave. commercial district. Each of these developments not only fulfills the need for affordable units but will also significantly transform the surrounding area by eliminating blight, mitigating contamination, and filling holes in the streetscape.

The city is also exploring regulatory changes such as inclusionary zoning which would require that residential developments of a certain size set aside a percentage of units as affordable to low-to-moderate-income households. While some communities may continue to resist the development of new workforce housing, East Providence continues to prioritize housing affordability for its residents as a goal and recognizes that housing is a crucial piece of economic development.

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