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East Providence links environmental and economic success - by Keith Brynes

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Over the past few years, the city of East Providence has stood out as one of New England's economic success stories. The city has seen investment including relocations and expansions of international manufacturing firms and an unprecedented amount of housing development. While this economic progress has been significant, it has not come at the expense of the city's environmental resources. On the contrary, the city's economic success has been directly linked to improvements to the city's environmental health.

The city's expansive Waterfront District is the area where this linkage can best be seen. Where trains once hauled fuel along the Providence River and cut off public access to the riverfront, the East Bay Bike Trail now serves as one of the city's most beloved resources. This area was once dominated by fuel storage tanks and other heavy industrial uses. Years after the departure of the fuel companies, these properties sat contaminated and unused. Since the formation of the Waterfront District in 2003, many of these sites are being transformed into developments, which have remediated the contamination left by prior industrial users.

The Kettle Point development by Churchill & Banks Co. reclaimed a former tank farm into 228 residential units and medical office space with a public fishing pier and a direct connection to the bike path. Churchill & Banks Co. has also begun construction at their East Point development. This former steel mill property required extensive mitigation using federal funds and will now consist of 392 units of housing with riverfront public access. Redevelopment of these parcels also improves water quality through the use of contemporary stormwater management techniques that slow and filter runoff prior to discharge into the river. Water quality in the Seekonk River will also significantly increase with the completion of the Narragansett Bay Commission's Sewer Overflow Tunnel Project, which will hold storm-related sewage overflows that are currently released into the river. This project will also create acres of riverfront parkland in East Providence and surrounding communities.

The Waterfront District is also being transformed through the renewable energy sector of the economy. The South Quay site was created out of filled land in the 1980s. Today this land will be put to an environmentally positive use as a centralized hub of intermodal shipping designed to support the offshore wind industry. The Dexter St. solar energy facility is another renewable energy reuse of a former brownfield. The system generates power, which saves Rhode Island Public Transit Authority approximately \$250,000 per year through a remote net energy agreement and its carbon sequestration is equivalent to 3,232 acres of forest annually.

The city's Waterfront District has several remaining properties available for investment. Some of these have already undergone environmental remediation. Others still have the potential to be mitigated as part of redevelopment. State and federal brownfields loans and grants may be available to assist in private investment. The city is continuously striving to ensure that the vision of the Waterfront District as a source of economic vibrancy, environmental success and riverfront public access becomes a reality.

Keith Brynes, AICP, is the director of planning and economic development for the city of East Providence, R.I.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540