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City of East Providence invests in Riverside Square - by Mayor Roberto DaSilva

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Roberto DaSilva

The city of East Providence's Riverside Square neighborhood is once again becoming a thriving Main St. area thanks to the efforts of the local business community and targeted public investment. Visitors to the square today will find a vibrant, walkable area with users of the East Bay Bike Path stopping at its locally owned businesses. However, this wasn't always the case. The area that was once considered the "Coney Island of New England," due to its amusement parks and resorts, saw significant disinvestment at the end of the 20th century. These issues included the closure of the Crescent Park Amusement Park and significant commercial vacancies.

Today Riverside Square's transformation is well underway. What was an abandoned rail line 40 years ago is now the popular East Bay Bike Path. Riverside Square is the first "Main Street" destination visitors from Providence reach on the path, where they can stop for a drink, a meal or shopping. Perhaps the most visible change in the area is the development of the "Residences at Riverside Square" currently under construction by ONE Neighborhood Builders. This 16-unit affordable rental development has repurposed the former VAMCO manufacturing site in the heart of the square. While this blighted and contaminated property once defined the streetscape, it is now being repurposed as much needed affordable housing. The site was purchased by the city in 2007 and a \$500,000 site remediation was completed using federal and state grant funds. The site was then sold to ONE Neighborhood Builders in 2021.

The city has invested in placemaking including public art, signage, banners, landscaping, an outdoor stage and lighting along the bike trail in order to promote the square as a destination. These changes have created a more welcoming environment for visitors and residents, and public events, such as "Summer in the Square", have been drawing more visitors to local businesses. Local business owners have revitalized several buildings adding new businesses and more reasons to visit. Recent building renovations were partially funded through the city's Small Business Loan Program. Since 2018, two thirds of the empty storefronts in square and its surrounding area have now been occupied or are under construction. Recognizing the need to accommodate adaptive reuse of its buildings, the city also adopted the Riverside Square mixed-use overlay district in 2016. This district has allowed the types of mixed-use redevelopment and reuse of existing buildings that are desired by the community.

Riverside Square is more than just a story of successful public investment, it is the area's local business owners, residents, and local groups such as Riverside Renaissance, that have banded together to see this area thrive. The city is proud of the progress that has been made and is looking forward to what is to come. Those interested in learning more about economic development activities occurring in East Providence are encouraged to visit the city's economic development website at www.eastprovidencebusiness.com or contact the Department of Planning and Economic Development.

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

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