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City of East Providence's Watchemoket Square takes center stage - by Roberto DaSilva

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Motorists exiting I-195 onto Warren Ave. in East Providence are now greeted by a new sign communicating that they have arrived in the Watchemoket Sq. neighborhood of East Providence. This sign represents the changes that have been occurring in this area. Early in the twentieth century, Watchemoket Sq. was the traditional downtown of central East Providence. Its character changed with the construction of I-195 in the 1960s as many buildings were demolished and neighborhoods were disconnected by the highway.

Despite these changes, Watchemoket Sq. is rebounding as a location for arts and entertainment in the city. Today the area is the gateway to Rhode Island's East Bay region and is the location where the East Bay Bike Path enters East Providence. The area is home to the Comedy Connection, known as a regional entertainment destination. Adjacent restaurants, such as the Black Duck and Local 133, add to the nightlife in this area. New investment is occurring such as the recently constructed Residences at Bold Point. The city is currently undertaking site work to improve nearby Bold Point Park. This waterfront park will be home to Bold Point Pavilion by Rhode Island Waterfront Enterprises, which will be designed similar to Boston's Leader Bank Pavilion. The park is expected to host concerts by 2025. Ongoing construction of a new I-195 off-ramp to Waterfront Dr. will further improve access to Watchemoket Sq. and the city's Waterfront District.

Watchemocket Sq. is home to several historic buildings including the Odd Fellows Building in which restoration has commenced. Thanks to a grant from the Rhode Island Foundation, and the work of the East Providence Arts Council, a mural honoring the history of the region's Pokanoket people was recently completed on Warren Ave. Watchemoket Sq. is located in the heart of the East Providence Arts District. The Arts District, created in 2021 through state enabling legislation, provides state income tax relief to artists who live in the district. The city has invested in beautification and public art in this area including a sculpture garden and new landscaping. A public parking lot will soon be added to accommodate additional economic development with the help of a grant from the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank.

The city recently completed a Placemaking and Multi-Modal Access Improvement Study of Watchemoket Sq. This study lays out recommendations and plans for the future of this area, which were determined after much public input. The study will help to guide future public and private investment as the area continues to be revitalized. Work must still be done to improve connections to and from the bike path and the waterfront. The city of East Providence recognizes the role of Watchemoket Sq. as a burgeoning arts and entertainment district and is looking forward to see these plans come to fruition.

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