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East Providence invests ARPA funds in priority areas - by Roberto DaSilva

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In 2021, with the nation reeling from much of the economy shutting down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government implemented the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program, which was authorized by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). This program distributed \$350 billion to state and local governments to support their recovery from the public health emergency. The City of East Providence received nearly \$30 million from this program. Funds were allowed to be spent, not only on directly addressing the pandemic but also on a wide range of activities related to the community's long-term recovery and growth. Per the program's guidelines, all funds had to be allocated by the end of 2024 but all spending must occur by the end of 2026.

This allocation of funds represented an unprecedented opportunity for the city to address several issues. In 2021, the city surveyed residents to help establish funding priorities. Results showed that residents favored investments in areas such as public infrastructure, community health and wellness, and small business assistance. The city used this survey as a guide in planning its spending.

The city invested nearly \$19 million of its funding on public infrastructure and assets. This includes almost \$5.5 million on improvements to various city parks, approximately \$5 million on sewer system upgrades, and \$3 million to construct a new seawall at Crescent Park after the failure of the existing wall during a storm. A citywide hydraulic analysis will also help address stormwater issues. Approximately \$3.5 million was also spent on public safety infrastructure including police station renovations and improvements to the city's public safety communications center and animal control facility.

Approximately \$3 million was allocated to the construction of a new community recreation center to be completed in 2026. This facility will offer recreation programming, job training, health monitoring services and other community programming. Twice over the past 20 years, bonding for the construction of this center was approved through voter referendums. However, development never occurred due to funding constraints. Current ARPA funding, in addition to other acquired state and federal grants, finally makes construction possible without any local taxpayer dollars.

The city also allocated over \$1 million in community development programs including funding for local youth recreation leagues and a storefront improvement program focusing on local main streets. Funds were also spent on citywide placemaking projects to enhance some of the things that make East Providence special, including wayfinding signage and a beachfront mural at Crescent Park. Additional funds were spent on other needs including information technology improvements, the mayor's Summer Youth Workforce Program and benefits.

In addition to ARPA funds, the city has been successful in securing millions of dollars in other state and federal grants to assist in funding a variety of projects to benefit its residents. We will continue our efforts to offer the best services and infrastructure possible with limited funds from local taxpayers.

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

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