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City of East Providence's Storefront Improvement Program beautifies main streets - by Roberto DaSilva

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In 2021, as small businesses were struggling during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the city of East Providence sought to help these establishments and beautify the city's main commercial thoroughfares. With these goals in mind, the city developed its Storefront Improvement Program. This program was funded through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and prioritized key streets in Qualified Census Tracts. The program targeted business sectors that were hit hardest by the pandemic, such as retail, personal care services, recreation and food services.

The program's specific goals were to bring energy and foot traffic to commercial corridors, create a more pleasing walking environment and preserve and beautify existing buildings. Funds were offered to property owners and/or tenants of commercial properties to improve or restore the original character of their buildings. The program was part of a larger strategy to reinvest in the community's business corridors, including underutilized structures and the neighborhoods that surround them.

Eligible applicants received grants of up to \$40,000 for eligible storefront improvements. For grant requests of over \$10,000, applicants had to provide a 25% match of the amount over \$10,000. Grants of up to \$10,000 did not require a match. The match could not be met using funds from other ARPA-funded programs (such as the Take It Outside program).

The city allocated a total of nearly \$850,000 on this program. Thirty-six businesses were awarded grants. The majority of these businesses have completed improvements which are now visible throughout the city. These included legacy businesses and new establishments that reused underutilized and vacant storefronts. The program is now closed to new applications. However, grantees have until the end of 2026 to complete their projects.

This program has worked together with the city's other recent placemaking initiatives to beautify the city. These include a utility art box project, public art installations, park improvements, public improvements to the Riverside Sq. area, a beachfront mural at Crescent Park, and new public signage.

The Storefront Improvement Program includes several success stories. These include the renovation of a vacant hardware store into one of the region's most exciting live music venues. Another grant helped transform a vacant manufacturing building into the city's first microbrewery. Yet another is renovating a vacant commercial building that had significant code violations. Several properties also included murals on blank walls to further improve the streetscape.

By any measure, the program was a success that helped revitalize the city's main streets, bolstered neighborhood businesses and attracted new investment. The city is looking forward to the completion of these projects over the next two years.

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

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