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Mayor's message: The greening of our economy

August 13, 2009 - Rhode Island

The Blackstone River Valley of Rhode Island and Massachusetts is known as the birthplace of America's Industrial Revolution. Along these waters, Providence merchant Moses Brown financed the first successful water-powered cotton-spinning factory in the country, and the birth of industrialization. That work launched a new era in our young nation - transforming our economy from one of farms to factories.

Today, along these same waters, a new industrial revolution is occurring - it is the green economy. Along our Woonasquatucket River corridor, one of several rivers feeding Narragansett Bay, is a thriving and emerging sustainable economy. Old warehouses are being renovated and restored for new clean and even organic industries ; brownfields are being reclaimed and remediated, and new urban artists and designers are cropping up along those sites.

What it tells us is that our capacity to rebuild ourselves - especially in trying economic times - is remarkable. The innovation and ingenuity that built centuries of opportunity for American workers and entrepreneurs is evident in our community and notably, in the Valley and Olneyville neighborhoods of Providence. Consider the creative work and business being done in some of those sites, mostly without fanfare.

The Steelyard is a 3-acre former brownfield being transformed into manufacturing for a new wave of designers. It is also the home to a number of non-profit groups. Teaching metalworking to public and charter school students, proprietors are engaging youth in the art of this trade, creating trash receptacles for permanent installation, and offering classes in glass, ceramics, jewelry, mixed media and found object sculpture. Additional on-site brick warehouses have transformed into restaurant, mixed office use and industrial space.

The Wolcott St. Eco-Office, along the green corridor, has conducted a \$1 million renovation into a mixed use residential-commercial facility, the first zero-energy building in the city. It will house offices and a call center for the solar-energy business of Alteris, the leading regional energy-alternative company.

At the American Locomotive site, Streuver Brothers, Eccles and Rouse renovated acres of brownfields and former manufacturing plants into mixed use development with 52,000 s/f of retail, 155,000 s/f of office space and 330 residential units. This is the new home to the Rhode Island Economic Development Corp., and headquarters for organic food purveyors United Natural Foods Inc.

Down the road, creative entrepreneurs designed 50,000 s/f of commercial space called Box City. And there is the Price Right Plaza, a former industrial site; the Faxon buildings - a sustainable/green commercial development; King Crossing, the site of 46 affordable housing units; the Plant and Calendar Mills - a restored live-work space, with a new restaurant and commercial space. And at Capco Steel brownfields are being transformed into new manufacturing area for a business that is

building Fenway Park, Shea Stadium and Yankee Stadium and employing 700 workers

in higher-wage, higher-skilled industries.

Our message is clear: where we have led before, we can lead again. Come to Providence and see for yourself where our second Industrial Revolution is shaping up.

David Cicilline is the mayor of Providence.

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