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A Proposal for Developing An Arts and Cultural District in East Providence, Rhode Island

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Class Project: A Proposal for Developing An Arts and Cultural District in East Providence, Rhode Island

PA 351.91 Sustainable Economic and Community Development

Fall 2013

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A project of the Community Partnerships Center of
Roger Williams University



Executive Summary

Many smaller cities around the United States struggle to obtain, or retain, a regional competitive advantage. Successful models rely on nurturing existing resources as a way of more clearly defining their identity.

East Providence is one such city. Located adjacent to Rhode Island's largest city, Providence, the City boasts a diverse population, strong and stable communities and accessibility. Adjacent to its waterfront, the City boasts a small, but viable, commercial district that includes a number of arts venues.

For this project, the City sought guidance in determining the potential for developing an expanded arts and cultural district in a, roughly, 10 block area surrounding Water Street.

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Introduction

This paper is the final, group project developed by students of Roger Williams University/School of Continuing Studies in PA 351/Sustainable Economic and Community Development in the fall of 2013. PA351 is an undergraduate course conducted face to face at the Providence Campus. The following is the course description from the University's Catalogue:

"[This course] ...explores key subject areas related to sustainable economic development, including business creation and retention, microenterprises, co-ops, job creation, asset development, sector analysis, the connection between economic development and social health. Examines the role that community development professionals can and should play in ensuring that economic development occurs in a sustainable manner.

Components of this class include developing core academic and professional skills including research, writing, discussion, community building, analysis and synthesis. In addition students will be asked to explore their own theories of community development. This will require introspection and reflection. Students should expect this conversation to include more questions than answers."

The learning objectives for the course are to provide students the opportunity to understand:

- The context, history and background of the field of community economic development (CED)
- The definition and classic purpose of CD
- Economic and other measures / indicators used by practitioners in the development of CED programs and projects
- Policies designed to control and induce private sector initiatives
- An understanding of the different kinds of capital that influence the sustainability of CD programs (financial, human and social capital).
- The relationship among and between commercial, business and housing development with economic development
- How the economic sustainability of CD initiatives can be measured – both within organizations and the larger community

environment

The sections of this report were developed as part of the final assignment with each section prepared by students in the class. As much as possible, students' own 'voices' were retained in this narrative as a way of preserving the individuality of their thoughts and ideas.

This report includes two parts. The first is a narrative that outlines the class's thought process. The second is a Powerpoint presentation that includes the key points that the class offers to the City for consideration.

Background and Methodology

The area adjacent to Providence Harbor, south of I-195, was selected as the focal point for this study. The City had successfully applied to the Community Partnerships Program (CPC) of Roger Williams University to obtain assistance with this project.

Students conducted 'windshield surveys' of the area to collect data. Students reported back to the class, on a weekly basis.

During the first part of the course, students studied best practice models. They participated in discussions to refine their understanding of sustainable community economic development practice. By the midpoint of the semester, students began to formulate a conceptual framework that would serve as the basis of this report. During the second half of the semester, after students were assigned their tasks for the final project, they began work on their different sections of the final report.

The class' assignment was to develop a concept for an arts and cultural district. Because of time constraints, the class focused on the benefits of creating such a district and recommendations on some of the preliminary steps that should be taken to initiate the project. The assignment included an analysis of the target population, developing a problem statement and proposed objectives. The City could use the material as a basis to further develop the district.

Eric L. Jacobs, Ph.D.

Instructor

Problem Statement

While there are a small number of venues in the area, the class quickly realized that there was a need to think out of the box when considering how to make the area into a destination point. The class spent a considerable amount of time considering how the waterfront could be incorporated into a broader planning process – including the creation of outside venues. An additional point of concern was the lack of a feeling of 'place' in the area. For instance, members of the class discussed the different existing entertainment venues, but expressed concern that there were few attractions available that kept people in the area for longer periods of time.

In general, the consensus of the class was that improvement of the waterfront was essential to create a sense of place for the area.

This proposal is directed to the City of East Providence/Community Development Office. The Community Development office is a partially federally funded section of the East Providence Planning Department. The office allocates funds after they are presented to and approved by the City Council.

The City is seeking to develop an Arts and Entertainment district that runs along and around Warren Avenue from the Oddfellows Hall at 63 Warren Avenue westerly towards the waterfront and southerly towards Juniper Street. The area encompasses several blocks including a primarily commercial area along the waterfront, some mixed use location with varying concentrations of commercial & residential use, and several blocks of primarily residential dwellings, mostly 1-4 family units. The area is also buffered by Route 195 (including easily accessible exits), Providence Harbor and encompasses the current termination point of the East Bay Bike path, a popular tourist & recreation destination.

The proposed Arts & Entertainment district could provide a source of tourist revenue for the city by increasing cash flow sources from outside the city, while also improving under-utilized land currently located in the area. The local residents would benefit from an improvement to public spaces by expansion of current spaces and reclamation of currently vacant and/or underutilized lots in the subject area. The improved public spaces would create increased traffic to the area, via pedestrian, bicycle, automotive and potentially boats such as water taxis. The improved pedestrian traffic would potentially benefit existing local businesses in the area and also create a magnet for new economic development within the City.

An arts and entertainment district could include, but is not exclusive to performing arts such as dance and music. It could include venues for other forms of visual art, including sculpture and painting. Venues can be enclosed or located in the open spaces in the neighborhood.

Discussions included drawing upon the rich cultural heritage and the waterfront traditions of the target area as a primary inspiration for the arts movement. East Providence has deep cultural roots in various ethnic communities such as Portuguese, Cape Verdean, and a variety of Latin and Hispanic cultures such as Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban to name a small few.

The development of the area is not without its challenges, however. The Oddfellows Hall has been suggested as a focal point for the development of the arts and entertainment district. The hall is a historic building, currently being reviewed for grant-funded renovations. The building offers a unique architectural detail to the area, but appears to be in great disrepair. The cost and subsequent cost of renovations will be a major consideration to the utilization of the building and its role in the neighborhood. The Oddfellows Hall is also somewhat disconnected physically from the waterfront district. There is limited parking and footpath access between the hall and the waterfront.

Although the target neighborhood is easily accessible from the highway, local streets, the bike path from the East Bay and the waterfront, simple logistics are not a given. There is currently very limited parking in the area overall, not just near the Oddfellows Hall. Signage is also limited. Access to the waterfront is not immediately obvious from the highway or from the local streets. The district will need to develop a better means of directing traffic to the proposed developments. Some means of repurposing existing lots and cooperation with current business owners will be necessary. Repurposing may involve taking back vacant land, rezoning existing lots for the new development, and expansion of existing public space. There are pre-existing restrictions on some lots due to underground utilities and there may be some environmental issues.

If the waterfront is left unimproved, the current utilization of the land will continue to be unproductive financially (minimal property tax revenue at the very least) and may even be creating potential hazards and costs from collection of garbage and overgrowth of weeds on certain lots. The waterfront in general needs a facelift. There is an old, partially removed train bridge that is an eyesore. If it is not refinished, it will take away from the visual appeal of the area and may turn

visitors away. While there is marina, it does not appear modern and inviting. Seemingly outdated facilities also deter visitors and slow economic growth. There appears to be a marine storage & salvage yard that gives a rundown, industrial look to the area.

There are challenges to increasing pedestrian traffic also. There is close proximity to the City of Providence and India Point Park in particular. A footbridge over the river via I-195 is currently under construction which includes an extension of the bike path. However, the connection of the existing bike path and integration into a proposed waterfront development should be addressed sooner rather than later; this would be more cost effective than changes after the foot bridge is complete. This can also benefit the existing businesses such as the 133 Club, or the Comedy Connection if they are also integrated into the new development by making it easier for visitors to the waterfront to solicit to the existing business. The redevelopment will be more successful if it is viewed as mutually beneficial. If the redevelopment appears to benefiting one group at the expense of another, there will be more resistance to the change and the project will see less success.

Overall the existing local population of both businesses and residents will need to be engaged to create public participation. A dialogue of proposed changes will be necessary to the area to minimize pushback from the existing businesses and residents. Creating public participation will prevent any potential delays and increasing costs to the project by creating an area that serves the needs of the local community residents and businesses as well as serving the financial needs of the city. The city need to be involved as many of the proposals will likely require modification of existing zoning regulations already in place. The Office of Community Development will be coordinating with the city's Waterfront Commission, which has pre-existing guidelines for development, as well as other city departments such as zoning and the planning department overall. The city will need to coordinate any changes to the existing bike path as an extension of the path over the I-95 Bridge comes closer to completion.

The potential benefit to the target area of East Providence is without question. While there are many challenges, stated here and likely to be determined in the future, the reward of sustainable economic development via improved public spaces appears to be well worth the risk. The Community Development program of Roger Williams University is suggesting further study for the feasibility of the redevelopment of the East Providence Waterfront District along and adjacent to the East Bay bike path.

Target Population

The class struggled a bit in defining a target population. In general, community development projects target marginalized communities. In this case, the class agreed that by creating new artist venues and improving the open space along the waterfront, people of different backgrounds will feel comfortable coming to the area and spending time enjoying themselves. In other words, expansion and improvement of commercial and public spaces would help to bring people together and strengthen social capital.

Neighborhoods within walking or bicycling distance of the district will be the most directly served by an expansion of services in the area. The key to the success of the district will be to attract pedestrian and bicycling traffic from the East Bay Bike Path which will be connected with the East side of Providence in the fall of 2014. The East Bay Bike Path is the most popular bike path in Rhode Island, drawing over a million people every year.

In an effort to prevent social polarization within the East Providence community amongst various social groups, we are recommending that the project target multiple census tracts in East Providence and the east side area of Providence. These census tracts are comprised of high-income and low-income families and individuals of all ages. Specifically, there are seniors who live within the neighborhood who might take advantage of expanded opportunities if they felt the area was safe and accessible.

The goal of the project is to promote equality and break down boundaries by targeting the various cultures, ages, races/ethnicities, economic and education levels.

Almost half of the homes in East Providence are owner occupied. With that in mind this project aims to create a sustainable district that should not directly lead to gentrification of the area. The district will compliment the existing environment. Being able to walk to arts and cultural events, great restaurants and services can help to building a sense of inclusivity. The goal is to expand the area as a destination place for people of all demographic backgrounds by expanding the availability of affordable artist venues and recreation spaces in the area.

The class felt strongly that in order to begin the process of planning for the district, key stakeholders should be identified to participate in a broader planning process. The class felt that this process would be

more likely to lead to a long-term, sustainable, project that would be supported by the targeted communities.

To begin the project, the City should (as soon as possible) reach out to certain key stakeholders, including:

- Police enforcement
- Homeowners
- Business owners
- Schools (RISD)
- Residents living in senior developments
- Religious institutions, including St Mary's Episcopal Church

Once representatives from each of these groups are identified, the City should begin the process of creating a formal mechanism to hold regular public meetings and disseminate information on the project's progress. This would help create a mechanism to receive input from different community groups on:

- What kinds of venues the district should include,
- How the waterfront might be improved
- Signage, infrastructure improvements and other environmental elements that would help to create a sense of place in the neighborhood

The class spent some time considering different kinds ways of making the area a sustainable destination for the target populations.

The idea behind creating a public space is not just about creating a nice looking addition to a town but to create a space that the people will actually use. To create a space that successfully engages people is an art form and a science that relies on the input of the community, the testing of ideas, sharp observation and detailed planning. In other words, it could be better to hear residents' opinions.

The following could be the kinds of things stakeholders might want to consider that would make the area more enjoyable for people:

- A docking area and a Kayak/canoe/bike rental shop and office space.
- Restaurants – ice cream for summer, casual and upscale
- Shopping
- Art Gallery
- Night clubs
- Winter – sledding
- Mobile food venues

- A hot chocolate stand
- Museum Art – Cape Verdean and Portuguese
- Bike path, it could be extended from where it is now and go around the park
- Waterfront access/roadways – an easier connection for the people to drive around the park.
- Parking space – Available public parking along roadways and pedestrian crosswalks.
- Trash and recycling bins all around the park
- Water fountain and flower garden with sculpture walk
- Playground and picnic areas
- Entertainment center Stage – For people to enjoy some music on holidays or other weekend's celebration performance as well.

Project Objectives

This section includes some key objectives that The City of East Providence will need to incorporate into their planning process. These objectives will help ensure that the project is a success.

The first objective is to include public participation. Residents of the area need to be included the planning phases of this project. Their lives will be directly affected by increased pedestrian and vehicular traffic, noise, and some loss of privacy. Inviting the residents to meetings, listening to their ideas and objections and incorporating some of them will help the residents feel that they are part of what is going on in their city.

Local business owners also need to be included. There will be increased competition as well as the chance for increased revenues. This may also lead to more jobs being created for the local residents.

These public meetings will need to be prefaced by mailings to each resident and business in the area detailing what will be discussed and allow ample time for public comment. These mailings should also include a small map of the area in question showing the area or areas to be developed first and those that are being targeted in the future. A timeline showing the anticipated duration of the development would assist the residents in developing their concerns and ideas.

These should be mailed two to three weeks prior to the meeting, also publishing notices in the local newspaper and sending flyers home with local school children. This will ensure that as many residents and business owners are aware of the meetings as possible.

The number of residents and local business owners that attend the meetings and voice their concerns and ideas is important because it will give the City of East Providence an idea of the direction that the project should take and help to build consensus.

Resident concerns including traffic, parking, taxes and construction noise (especially infrastructure) should be addressed at the beginning of the project as well as during the development.

Public participation will also lead to the second objective, generating a sense of place. The residents will gain a sense of place if their cultural influences are incorporated into the development within the realms of artwork, food, and shopping. School children can paint a mural showing their heritages. There should be places for human interaction, conversation and cultural exchange.

The best use of the space would be pedestrian oriented to foster a sense of community and enhance the sense of place for residents and visitors alike.

What needs to be done to create commercial interest?

Design and management of the Park - As towns increasingly compete with one another to attract investments, the presence of a high quality park, gardens and other public spaces have become an essential business and marketing tool as companies are attracted to locations that offer well-designed, well-managed public places and these in turn attract customers, employees and services.

Friendly Policies: Government policy and regulation is one reason for investors to be interested in investing on a city. If government make policies too restrictive, it can become very difficult for business owners to run their companies. Friendly policies will always facilitate and encourage entrepreneurs to decide to start a business on a new place.

Small business Loans are another way to motivate people to do business in a place. In our days the way the economy is going, many people are worrying about taking risks. If small business loans are available with low interest it makes easier to start a company. Business owners will be less worried because they will take advantage of the low interest and also they will have more time to pay back the loans.

Tax breaks and Fast-track building permit process also can help to attract business.

Public Safety - Enforcing public safety in the area is crucial for the sense of safety for the people and for the protection of the park. Many times young adults, children and women are prevented from enjoying the parks because of fear of crime. And so as the business owners that would feel more comfortable and less worried about themselves, employees and their assets.

Presentation

Below is a Powerpoint Presentation that provides an outline of the key conclusions of the research.

USING OPEN SPACE TO CREATE AN ARTS/ ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT IN EAST PROVIDENCE, RI

Sustainable Economic and Community Development

Fall 2013

Students:

Lisa Bruce, Nicole Bush, Gregory Ehlinger, Kenya Fullen, Jonathan Lax, Susan Leonardi, Ana Santana,
Neuci Silva

Instructor

Eric L. Jacobs, Ph.D.

Introduction

This project examines the potential for expanding the use of, and enhancing access to, the waterfront area of East Providence. The class sees this as the first step in developing an arts, cultural and recreational 'center' for the City. Additionally, the class sees this as a catalyst for mobilizing members of the community and expanding the market for commercial establishments in East Providence.

Why consider an Arts, Cultural and Recreational Project for East Providence

Arts and culture are transcontinental...a *universal* theme:

The expansion of arts, cultural and recreational programs and projects has the potential to promote equality and reduce marginalization by targeting various cultures, ages, races/ethnicities, economic and educational levels

Needs Statement

- **Create** an identity for East Providence as a destination for the arts, entertainment and recreation
 - **Encourage** more pedestrian traffic to the area, using the waterfront as an environmental asset to anchor the project with existing & expanded public spaces
 - **Capitalize** on the increased pedestrian traffic with business growth & development to economically benefit local residents.
-

Problem Statement

- The area adjacent to the waterfront can be made easily accessible from the highway, the local streets, the bike path from the East Bay and the waterfront. However, simple logistics are not a given. The access to the waterfront is not immediately obvious from the highway exits or from local streets. The district will need to develop a better means of directing traffic to the proposed developments. Some means may involve repurposing existing lots, expansion of existing public space, creating accessible pedestrian friendly and infrastructure improvements for the new development. There are pre-existing restrictions on some lots to underground utilities and potential environmental issues. The waterfront needs a facelift, the outdated facilities will deter visitors and slow economic growth.
-

A Note About Oddfellows Hall

- The Oddfellows Hall has been suggested as a focal point for the development of the arts and entertainment district. We believe it should be reviewed for grant funded renovations. The hall is an historic building and offers a unique architectural detail to the area, but appears to be in great disrepair.
-

Why is this a Worthy Project

- Social Bonds are enhanced when public spaces are improved – human capital –empowerment for local residents
 - Improve local traffic helps local business – economic capital
 - Arts, entertainment and recreational improvements can lead to increased economic, environmental, human and social capital
 - The potential for creating green jobs can develop human & economic capital
-

Theory of Change

- Redeveloping public spaces, including the waterfront will promote community among the residents & drive traffic into East Providence from surrounding areas.
 - Developing the area with Arts & Entertainment will increase pedestrian traffic, promote existing businesses and help create opportunities for new businesses in the area, particularly locally owned.
 - Involvement of the community from the beginning has the potential to create a sustainable economy and community development in East Providence.
-

Target Populations

- Residents of East Providence and the East Side of Providence will be the initial target populations.
 - This project seeks to involve families and individuals, residents and businesses, artists and patrons.
-

Target Patrons

Customers of the existing businesses

Residents living in the neighborhoods within walking distance of the area

People who use the bicycle path

People who will drive into the area from other surrounding areas

The Importance of the Bike Path

The East Bay Bike Path is the most popular bike path in Rhode Island, drawing over a million people every year.

+/- 45,000 people have direct access to the bike path.

How the Target Communities were Defined

The target members are three communities of place:

- . The residents living in the neighborhoods within walking or bicycling distance of the East Providence waterfront area
 - . Families and Households who are committed to living in those East Providence and Providence East Side neighborhoods
 - . Members of the Artists and Artisan Community committed to living in those East Providence and Providence East Side neighborhoods.
-

Empowerment

Compelling reasons for active public participation in the project:

The project's infrastructure, facilities, and activities will meet the needs of residents and businesses and lead to their continuing support and use of the improved district

› Empowered participants will have a renewed sense of ownership and responsibility for the arts district

› An active process of public participation, which respects the diversity within the communities, will help break down barriers between groups and promote cultural diversity among the stakeholders

Marginalization

- In an effort to break down silos which currently exist within the East Providence community amongst various social groups, we are targeting the people from the neighborhoods of East Providence and the east side of Providence, and eventually the surrounding areas.
 - The neighborhoods we chose are comprised of high-income and low-income families and individuals.
 - The target population was also chosen because the diversity of the target population is crucial for marketing and recruitment efforts. Diverse incomes, educational levels, and housing options will help build the strength and character of East Providence.
-

Transformation and Sustainability

- **Human Capital** – Historically, residents of the target areas have diverse backgrounds, including: strong family households, high rates of homeownership, deep neighborhood roots, high educational attainment and affluence. By working together, members of each community can learn from and inspire each other.
 - **Social Capital** – Creating a community based organization will help to foster long-term relationships that can be formed within a community of place. This reinforces the commitment to the emerging district and, for many of its stakeholders, begin to reverse marginalization within those neighborhoods
-

Transformation and Sustainability (cont.)

- **Environmental Capital** – The project will recover the East Providence waterfront for productive and environmentally sustainable use. The project will utilize the natural resources of the Seekonk River and surrounding lands, creating open public space for both human recreation and habitat preservation, improve the area's aesthetic qualities as a scenic resource, and encourage walking and biking.
 - **Economic Capital** – Over the long-term, this will lead to greater pedestrian traffic including expanding customer base for businesses. This will, in turn, lead to appreciating property values, more sales tax revenue and opportunities for further investment in community enhancements.
-

How were the Stakeholders Identified

- . 1) Studying the demographics of the area.
 - . 2) Using the initial results of the window and walking surveys.
 - . 3) By determining who would be most affected by this project.
 - . 4) Personal experiences from other classmates & research online.
-

The Key Stakeholders

- . Housing developments
 - . Civic, Community and Nonprofit Organizations
 - . Religious Institutions
 - . Police Enforcement & Government Officials
 - . Schools
 - . Small Business Owners
-

Proposed Action Steps

- 1) Meetings introducing the project to the community.
 - 2) Regularly send out updated information to residents and businesses
 - 3) Input should be requested from stakeholders & leaders.
 - 4) Form coalitions to represent each group in the community.
 - 5) Have public meetings to gather thoughts and questions for planners and developers.
 - 6) Regular communication among and between stakeholders to build social and economic capital and to
 - 7) Figure out what they can offer to expand and sustain the project.
-

Creating a Sustainable Project

- We believe that involving the stakeholders will create a sustainable project because once they have become a part of the project and feel welcomed by the developers and planners they will take pride in doing something good for their community. This will insure consistent participation and dedication to the development of the area. When people are a part of something from the beginning they are more likely to stick around for a longer time, and see the project through – generating citizen participation.
-

Objective: Change of Knowledge

Public Participation: Encourage the residents and business owners to attend meetings to voice their ideas, concerns and eliminate potential problems.

Objective: Change of Behavior

- **Create Commercial Interest** by offering business-friendly policies, small business loans, tax breaks and “fast-track” the building permit process.

Objective: Change of Condition

- **Generate a Sense of Place:** Public participation will lead to generating a Sense of Place. Cultural influences through food, entertainment, artwork and shopping will give local residents a feeling of belonging.
-

Objective: Change of Condition

- **Create a Public Space** with a combination of businesses, recreation and shopping that appeal to a wide variety of people.

How are the Objectives *SMART*?

Specific, Measurable, Appropriate, Realistic, Time-Bound

- The objectives provide measurable ways that can be used to illustrate each step of the project. They are measurable in terms of how many members of the public attend the meetings to voice their opinions/concerns and the number of business owners that show and interest in expanding. They are appropriate to the project because they highlight the important issues. They are realistic because they are achievable. They are time-bound as they will each need to be initiated at a certain point in the project.
-

Sustainability

Involvement of the community from the start of the process will help to ensure an ongoing sense of ‘ownership’ of the project and the neighborhood.

Creation of a community based organization, incorporating a coalition of stakeholders will help to ensure a mechanism exists to evaluate the completion of milestones

Making the waterfront into an **accessible**, multi-use, public space will make the neighborhood a destination place for the target population

Attracting new businesses in the area, and investing in infrastructure improvements will lead to greater tax revenue for the City.

... sustainability

Expanding business opportunities – including green businesses -- will help create new jobs and expand the number of customers for businesses.

Promoting equality and **reducing** marginalization by targeting various cultures, ages, races/ethnicities, economic and educational levels

Questions?
