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Cliff Wood: Partnerships breathe life into downtown

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In a few short weeks, the next phase in the life of Kennedy Plaza, Providence's historic central civic space will be unveiled. After months of construction and infrastructure improvement projects at Kennedy Plaza and nearby Burnside Park, the beginnings of a more pedestrian friendly, lively and welcoming city center will greet residents, visitors and transit riders who use the area every day.

There are three interrelated improvement projects central to this phase of our efforts to revitalize Kennedy Plaza. First, our partners at the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority have reconfigured the plaza's transportation hub by removing two lanes of bus berths. These lanes will be replaced with a more pedestrian-friendly space with rows of trees and ample room to set up public markets, public art and cultural activities and celebrations. By moving bus berths to the edges of the area along Exchange Terrace and Exchange Street, we are opening up Kennedy Plaza to serve as a central civic gathering space as well as an important transportation hub.

Just across from the plaza, we have made a number of improvements to Burnside Park. These improvements, made possible by a generous grant from the Champlin Foundations, include an attractive new entrance to the park and a new well-lit pedestrian footpath, accessible to those with disabilities, to better connect Kenney Plaza to nearby RIPTA bus berths and Providence's Amtrak train station.

The final element tying all of these improvements together is the city's Downtown Circulator Plan. Led by the Providence Planning Department and developed in consultation with RIPTA and other downtown stakeholders, the plan reconfigured traffic patterns around the parks to make them safer and more inclusive of the needs of a multi-modal city center.

All of this work could not have been accomplished without the leadership of Mayor Angel Taveras, who has consistently championed public-private partnerships such as the Downtown Providence Parks Conservancy (DPPC) to create a more vibrant Kennedy Plaza and a more vibrant downtown Providence.

The vision for a revitalized Kennedy Plaza grew out of a \$200,000 National Endowment for the Arts "Our Town" grant awarded to the city's Department of Art, Culture and Tourism in 2011. Working in collaboration with lead cultural partner FirstWorks, the Downtown Providence Parks Conservancy and over a dozen other organizations, including RIPTA, AS220 and the Providence Foundation, the city hosted a number of creative placemaking workshops and planning sessions to develop an actionable plan.

Growing out of these sessions was more than just a plan to reconfigure bus lanes, but a vision to create a Greater Kennedy Plaza filled with arts, entertainment and cultural activities for residents and visitors to enjoy. Over the last two years, that vision has begun with an impressive array of programming including the 2012 Firstworks Festival on the Plaza, which transformed Kennedy Plaza and Burnside Park into an outdoor performance venue and multi-stage spectacle, with world-class local, national and international performing artists. In addition, through the work of the DPPC, Burnside Park has become home to popular food trucks, the Downtown Farmers Market, and the Burnside Music Series and Beer Garden, all of which are drawing more people to enjoy downtown Providence.

Beyond the improvements at Kennedy Plaza, there is much momentum with several projects that are continuing the revitalization of the center of our capital city.

Just across from Kennedy Plaza, the new owners of the Biltmore have invested \$13 million to restore guest rooms and public spaces, while Cornish Associates has breathed new life into the Biltmore Garage with new ground floor restaurants and retail shops.

Thanks to state historic tax credits, the irreplaceable Arcade and Providence Gas buildings have been revitalized as mixed-use residential, retail and restaurant developments bringing new residents, patrons and energy to downtown.

With funding from the Providence Redevelopment Agency, PopUp Providence has been a similar success, transforming downtown streetscapes and storefronts into unique, whimsical and thought provoking art projects. Creative and interactive downtown PopUp projects have included the “Before I Die” chalkboards in Kennedy Plaza and Grants Block encouraging passers-by to share their ‘bucket list’ wishes, and the Providence Polaroid Project on Westminster Street giving residents and visitors the opportunity to capture and display hundreds of unique images in a participant driven exhibition and gallery space.

All of this exciting activity in Kennedy Plaza and throughout Downcity Providence is a testament to the power of public-private partnerships to bring together business owners, arts and cultural organizations, residents and government to develop a shared vision for improving our city. That vision is now becoming a reality, one that will continue downtown Providence’s renaissance as a truly vibrant place for people to visit, live, work and play.

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