

Revamped Kennedy Plaza in downtown Providence showcases new amenities at grand opening

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Mayor Jorge Elorza rode a bus from his Silver Lake neighborhood Tuesday morning and disembarked at the city's freshly renovated downtown transit hub, declaring that Providence has "reimagined what our city should be and what our city center can be."

After a \$2.4-million revamping project, Kennedy Plaza has reopened with many new amenities for riders and a more spread-out configuration with fewer bus stops, more space between those stops and a greater focus on aesthetics.

Elorza, now in the third week of his administration, happily took the opportunity to bring attention to the plaza enhancements, which were championed by his predecessor as mayor, Angel Taveras.

“There are so many improvements that have been made, and these improvements will not only serve the needs of our commuters but also create a community space that’s welcome to everyone, that will enable us to leverage our creative capital,” Elorza said.

In addition to the new layout, the changes range from new glass bus shelters and bicycle stands to new signs and a network of surveillance cameras to help the police keep an eye on the plaza. The facility has new trees and efforts have been made to support special lighting and electricity supply for concerts and other events.

Meanwhile, as one observer put it, an actual plaza has replaced what seemed like 10 lanes of traffic with narrow islands for commuters.

Council President Luis A. Aponte called the former plaza unwelcoming and barren.

The reconfigured 15-stop bus hub includes four bus stops along the periphery of nearby Burnside Park and a fifth stop on the other side of Exchange Terrace.

The new arrangement replaces the previous setup, which had 19 stops, including three stops outside the plaza.

About \$700,000 of the \$2.4 million spent on the project came via the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, which is now serving 21 million riders per year, up from 13 million riders annually not long ago.

“Our whole goal in all of this was to improve safety, comfort and convenience,” said the chairman of RIPTA’s board, Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian. “...we think our partnership with the City of Providence definitely

has accomplished that here for this wonderful space.”

The project’s visionaries see the renovation as the first phase in a wave of changes coming to downtown Providence in the years ahead.

Plans for a new intermodal transportation hub near the Amtrak station are in the works. And the relocation of an entire section of Route 195 has left open spaces for development and greenways for parks.

Clifford Wood, the executive director of the Downtown Providence Park Conservancy, likened the opportunity to the situation that Boston faced after the Big Dig removed elevated sections of Route 93.

Such a circumstance can present a city with an opportunity to succeed and flourish, said Wood. The chance for failure is possible, too.

“If you don’t maintain and manage and steward these urban spaces in such a way that they become a benefit,” said Wood, “they become a detriment.” Such a detriment isn’t “only a lack of manifested potential,” said Wood, “it’s actually a drag.”

One key to the success of a public space, he said, is that it serves many different people with different needs and interests. The old Kennedy Plaza served commuters alone, Wood noted.

Elorza suggested chess and domino tables in the future for the new public space.

He talked about Kennedy Plaza’s past, referring to Houdini escape acts in 1914 and 1917, to visits from presidents and to wartime dramas when Rhode Islanders went to the city’s center to say goodbye to departing soldiers. “That’s why it’s so exciting to unveil the new and reimaged Kennedy Plaza,” Elorza said. “With the new design, it will help us travel throughout our city and it will also help us transform this space into a vibrant urban gathering center.”