

Providence: Visionary and bold

Future historians who examine Rhode Island's capital city will likely single out the last 20 years of this century as the most explosive period of construction and change for the city center that has ever taken place during Providence's long history.

It started with the 72-acre Capital Center, which was originally designed to remove the old "Chinese Wall" of railroad tracks, build a new railway station and provide land for development of open space. Providence was the only city of 14 from Boston to Washington that persuaded the Federal Railroad Administration that we needed a new station and tracks, rather than simply an upgrade of our existing facility.

The Capital Center project has already demonstrated how dramatically it will shape one-fifth of Providence's compact central business district, now referred to as "Downtown" since the 1991 visit of urban planner and architect Andres Duany.

Architect Bill Warner, notable contributor to the project, claims that the river-relocation idea of the subsequent development came to him and his wife when they spread a series of drawings on the floor one Sunday morning, in trying to get a better sense of the overall Capital Center development.

That idea, costing \$40 million, has done much to turn us toward the water again with rivers for views and use, attractive bridges and walkways, better and more efficient alignment of Memorial Boulevard for highway travel, an additional building site and access to rivers.

The convention center, parking garages and new hotel—outgrowths of the Capital Center project—required extra land on which to build, in addition to land which came from the Capital Center. Slated to open in December, with the hotel to follow late next year, the convention center is a bold venture to capitalize on the state's third largest industry—tourism.

While this massive infusion of public money was being expended, Narragansett Electric was going through a four-year permitting process to upgrade and renovate its Manchester Street power station. Bordering the Providence River just to the north of the Hurricane Barrier, the \$650 million project now under way represents the largest private development in state history.

Just when we thought we had seen the culmination of such activities, we are about to move on what promises to be another innovative idea for Providence—the moving of Interstate 195 from its current site to one located south of the Hurricane Barrier.

The recent public hearing in Providence discussing the environmental impacts of the project drew a large crowd to consider the three options put forth by the state Transportation Department. The three possibilities are: repairing the current highway; building a new highway north and parallel to the current

highway; and building a new highway south of the Hurricane Barrier.

The first option requires two years of construction and would create daylong traffic jams in both directions. The second would not improve road safety or access to Rhode Island Hospital, is a barrier between the Jewelry District and downtown, provides little opportunity for water redevelopment and uses the same I-95 and I-195 interchange. The third option is the most expensive.

The current I-95/I-195 interchange is the most important and most frightening intersection in the state. Almost 250,000 vehicles fight for position and move through it daily. The Hurricane Barrier would provide a newer and safer site for an intersection and, in perhaps one of the most important spinoffs, would open up land for development on the south edge of downtown.

If the original highway is removed, the Old Harbor waterfront district from the Hurricane Barrier to the old Crawford Street Bridge could create 43 acres for development, one-third of which would be devoted to open space. The rest could be used for a biotechnology research park, as well as housing, shops and waterfront improvements suggested by the Providence Foundation and government sources.

Some parties object to the project because mass-transit needs are not addressed, and some

highway neighbors fear increased local traffic. But it seems inconceivable that the Hurricane Barrier would not be selected for this major highway connection through Providence. Its construction would be a fitting tribute to the late executive director of the Providence Foundation, Robert Freeman, who worked so diligently on this project.

It just boggles the mind to grasp the importance of what has taken place in Providence and what will take place. By the year 2000, Providence will have moved three major transportation locations—rail, water and highway—an accomplishment that no other city in this nation can match.

Pete Pointer, a Chicago consultant to the Capital Center project in the late 1970s when it was just a dream on paper, thinks the I-195 proposal is another fine innovation that will improve conditions in and around the city center. "Providence is a sleeper that is going to be discovered by increasing numbers of tourists," he says.

Say what you will: Providence has set a standard of vision and boldness that few cities, and none of comparable size, can only hope to reach.

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