

# Make the full investment in downtown renewal

## Chester Smolski

Just how much money is the city of Providence willing to invest in revitalizing its downtown? The answer to this question is soon to be given when the City Council acts on the recommendations of the Committee on Urban Redevelopment headed by Councilman Ralph R. Fagnoli. The committee voted Wednesday in favor of a \$6-million downtown renewal project.

Seven years ago the voters of Providence authorized the Providence Redevelopment Authority to borrow 10 million dollars for urban renewal. With the revived interest in the downtown, sparked by the *Interface: Providence* study, later carried forward by interested citizens and groups, Mayor Cianci recommended that all this money be used to restore the downtown. The Democratic city council did not agree with the Republican mayor so the figure for downtown investment was reduced to six million dollars, with the other four million dollars to be given to the Federal Hill area.

Prior to a public meeting held by the Committee on Urban Redevelopment in early January to solicit public reactions to the six-million-dollar figure for downtown, the head of this committee stated that a "portion" of that amount go to other shopping areas of the city. His statement was apparently predicated on the welcome news that Providence would receive almost five million dollars of public works money from the federal government for work on the Westminster Mall. Last night the committee overrode Fagnoli's objections.

There is no doubt that there are many needs in the city of Providence, as witness the most recent request of the Housing Sub-committee of the Mayor's Citizen Advisory Committee. They have asked for all of the approximately six million dollars of Community Development funds allocated to the entire city in order that each of the 1,600 household applicants get up to \$3,500 to fix their homes. If this were to happen then no Community Development money would be available for building community centers, no social

programs would be provided, and none of this money would be spent on parks, historic restoration or downtown. It is a case of too great a need with too little money available, so priorities must be established.

Based upon the responses of the public attending the Committee on Urban Redevelopment meeting, it was obvious that, almost without exception, the individuals speaking for themselves and their organizations want all of the six million dollars of renewal money spent in the downtown.

The combined public works and urban renewal money would total almost 11 million dollars of federal and city money for necessary improvements in the downtown. It is vital for the city to show the private sector that it believes in itself and is willing to invest in the future. The private sector, realizing that it cannot rebuild the downtown alone, even if it so desired, must have the cooperation of the city.

City money invested this way can serve as a catalyst for considerable private investment. Already 11 million dollars has been committed to the Biltmore Hotel, and the possible 30 million dollars for the Union Station can be the start of even greater private investment in the city center.

The seemingly large amounts of money which will eventually go into the downtown, given today's economic and inflationary conditions, will have to be stretched considerably. For example, consider the exciting Faneuil Hall Market Place in Boston, situated on only six acres of land with just 85,000 square feet of retail space. On a typical Saturday 75,000 people crowd themselves into this limited space. In the six years before the developer was chosen, the estimated cost of city and private money needed to complete the project doubled—from 10 million to 20 million dollars. In Providence the downtown renewal area covers 156 acres and who knows how much prices will rise before the job is finished.

The Faneuil Hall Market Place also illustrates the key role of downtowns. This one-third completed project already has created a positive image of Boston throughout the nation. In the first two months after its opening, more than 300 articles about it appeared in newspapers and magazines. The fantastic public reception of this small development in the Boston downtown has already generated sales per square foot four times the national average in the one market currently open.

Perhaps the Faneuil Hall Market Place is a unique phenomenon or maybe it portends

the renewed interest in, and a return to, the old town centers. Downtowns have traditionally been places with a variety of people and architecture; so different from the non-city suburban malls, those cinderblock concentrations with beautiful blacktop as far as the eye can see, and which are, according to Ada Louise Huxtable, "a new barbarism, if they weren't so completely and boringly banal."

The Providence downtown needs heavy city investment, not only to generate new jobs and to increase the tax base, but also to show that the city is on the move. It will require both vision and imagination on the part of those councilmen who determine the allocation of public money to see the potential of the only major downtown in all of Rhode Island and to give full funding for its renewal.

It is to be hoped that the full City Council will agree that all of the six million dollars be invested in the downtown renewal effort. It is also essential that neighborhood shopping areas also get some needed help, not from the downtown money but from the remaining four million dollars of bonding authorization.

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