

Revival of downtown Providence

Chester Smolski

Finally, on September 29, more than two years after the initial correspondence and subsequent competition, design, debate, public hearings and more public hearings, the proposal for the Kennedy Plaza auto restricted zone (ARZ) was passed by the Providence City Council. This necessary approval cleared the last barrier before the September 30 deadline of the Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA) so that Providence may be considered for nearly \$5 million of federal funds to implement this project.

A close examination of the proposal's circuitous route should clarify the public's understanding of the application process. It started with letters from UMTA sent to 75 cities throughout the country in August 1975 to ask if they wished to be considered for possible federal help in constructing demonstration projects which make better use of public transportation. Forty-five cities, including Providence, responded to this request.

In January 1976 five cities were selected to submit detailed plans of their proposals in order that UMTA might make a fair appraisal of projects most likely to be successful. Providence was chosen as one of the five "demonstration cities." Although prospects look very good for Providence, only two of the five cities will be selected this year for funding. The two successful cities will be notified of their awards by the end of the year.

The one-year development of the Kennedy Plaza proposal follows the new emphasis in planning which requires community input to such proposals. To provide opportunities for this community help in the design of the ARZ plan, meetings were held and presentations were made to interested parties for their suggestions and ideas to be incorporated into the plan.

Public reaction to the proposal, together with suggested changes in the plan, also came about in a series of public meetings called by the Council Committee on Urban Redevelopment, Renewal and Planning prior to Council approval. Although overwhelmingly approved by organizations and individuals, from senior citizens to college students and from bankers to bus drivers, there was some opposition voiced by a few business interests concerned with parking and automobile accessibility. Heated comments, criticisms and debate marked some of these meetings. But in the end, one week before the full Council meeting, members of the Committee voted unanimously for the proposal with the understanding that some minor changes in the plan might be forthcoming.

In the interim, the Providence Redevelopment Authority voted its unanimous approval that the local contribution of \$981,000 toward the total project cost be made. All of this took place before the City Council gave its unanimous approval. And now the city awaits the UMTA verdict.

Although local authorities gave their unanimous approval of the proposal throughout, there were major objections raised by a few people, primarily businessmen in the area affected by the plan. Transcripts of their statements, together with all others made at the public meetings will be sent to UMTA for them to

determine if there is the required community support of the project. It is to be hoped that the many who spoke out for the plan will receive the greater emphasis with UMTA officials. There is no doubt that the community which spoke to the questions, all those interested, concerned and affected citizens, were solidly behind the proposal.

The plan to create new pedestrian areas, provide better bus service, reduce air pollution and restrict autos in the Kennedy Plaza and Dorrance Street areas is an attempt to bring life and vitality to the downtown, while at the same time providing a more comfortable and pleasant environment for people. This plan, together with other city improvements being made on Weybosset Street and the Westminster Center, combined with private efforts being made at the Biltmore Hotel, Outlet Company and, soon, the Union Station have brought more new hope and optimism for the downtown than has been evident in over a decade.

It will not be easy and it does take time. If Providence is selected for funding, construction of the ARZ will not start until

the fall of 1978, at the earliest. Christmas shopping and cold weather will likely slow construction, so that completion could be delayed until well into 1979 or mid-1980. Constant monitoring and review by UMTA to ensure proper use of their \$4.9 million contribution to the total project cost of \$5.87 million is also another time constraint. Time is the price one pays for federal help.

Physical changes by themselves do not create a viable downtown. It will also require concerted and cooperative efforts on the part of the businessmen themselves to work together on a marketing strategy for increased retail sales.

Given these cooperative efforts of the private sector, in combination with local and federal government help, the compact and architecturally unique Providence downtown has a good chance for revival. But the work for this revitalization still lies ahead.

* * *

Chester E. Smolski is Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.

October 10
1977