

# New office building is good news, but questions of planning raised

**Chester Smolski**

The latest piece of news concerning a possible new office building for Providence is just another example of the renewed interest in the downtown of Rhode Island's capital city. Revitalization, resurgence, renewal — call it what you will — there is no question that the prognosis for the ailing city center is excellent and the "patient" is now on the road to recovery.

Cabot, Cabot & Forbes, a Boston-based, old-line real estate developer, with holdings throughout the country, will decide whether to go ahead with plans for the construction of a 600,000-square-foot office block that would be the largest in the state. Sited between the city's two tallest buildings, Industrial National Bank and Hospital Trust Tower, the possibly 40-story building would also be the tallest in the state. Over the next six months, CC&F will determine if the key ingredients for such a development, that is, site availability, financing and tenants, are right and whether they will go ahead with this construction.

An infusion of perhaps \$40 million of new construction is certainly exciting news for Rhode Island's major downtown. Combined with the approximately \$100 million of work committed or already under way by both the public and private sectors, prospects do indeed look good for the city center. But there are two questions that need to be raised about all of this development: first, how does all of this fit into the future plans for the downtown and, second, how do other prospective developers get adequate help if considering similar construction in our capital city?

Already questions are being raised about the impact this proposed new office space would have on existing offices, some of which are being constructed, rehabilitated or committed. A soon-to-open Charles-Orms Building, rehabilitated Fletcher Building, Hays Building and Strand Building, and the forthcoming General Services Administration Building, among others, reflect the need for more and better office space, a demand which has been substantiated by a recent economic study of the downtown. But will there be enough tenants for all of these buildings? Will tenants simply move from other buildings and leave other vacant space? And what of these old buildings?

(The Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission has rightly raised questions about historic buildings that may lose their appeal as office space, be vacated, and subsequently be razed, of course, for more parking space.) How does all of this construction fit together with the other activities of the city center? And who is providing this direction for the future?

Several months ago the city Planning and Urban Development Department received a \$57,000 commitment from the Office of Community Development to prepare a plan for the downtown, a job which they said would take a few months, using an additional staff person and some outside consultants. Such a plan would provide guidelines for future development and help tie together the pieces of a puzzle that need to be fitted together to get a comprehensive picture of the entire city center. But inordinate pressures of time on meeting a federal deadline for a UDAG proposal, working on a proposed GSA office building, and the most recent Providence Foundation proposal to relocate the railway tracks have prevented the planners from doing the necessary work. Given the time constraints, which will likely increase with other projects being developed, and the necessity for a plan, it would appear incumbent on PUD to give the entire job to outside consultants. Not only will the work be done sooner and on time but also it is always good to bring in fresh ideas from others.

The second question that must be addressed relates to the information and service which need to be provided to anyone contemplating work in the downtown. A developer considering construction in the heart of a city is faced with a whole list of constraints and regulations not found when building on raw land outside of an urban area. To make it easier for such a developer, there should be a "one-stop service center" to give information on building regulations, taxes, services, financing, possible sites, and a whole series of questions that require answers. Such a center could also compile data on vacancy rates, rents, types of activities, and other data to help developers make their decisions.

Although some of this work is done by the Providence Foundation and some city agencies, there is no one centralized office where all of this material can easily be obtained and where a staff is continually gathering data and promoting the city center, as they do in Atlanta with their private Central Atlanta Progress or in Miami with their quasi-public Downtown Development Authority. The management office which the city has proposed to go along with the auto-restricted zone in Kennedy Plaza is too small and too limited in scope to adequately provide the type and level of services needed for a city on the move, which is where Providence finds itself today.

A plan or guidelines for the downtown and a "one-stop service center" indicate to an outsider that a city has some idea of where it is going and is providing the necessary information and services to make it happen — a positive impression of a city. The continuing interest in city center development makes it necessary that Providence implement both of these.

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