

Restoring the Providence River system

The confluence of rivers that meet at the head of Narragansett Bay represents a precious natural and economic resource to Rhode Island citizens. The Seekonk flows from the northeast, joining the Providence River, fed by its two vital tributaries, the Woonasquatucket and the Moshassuck. They represent generations of indigenous peoples, colonial settlers, and waves of immigrant workers who for centuries have made their lives and livelihoods along, by, and from these rivers. In turn, the rivers have powered revolutions that have shaped the region, the nation, and the world.

It is imperative that we now focus on this complex and fragile urban waterway that weaves throughout the neighborhoods of our capital city, uniting diverse centers of commerce, community and opportunity. Our rivers provide a link to our past and a key to our future, and we must care for them as if our lives and our economy depend upon them. Because they do.

Over several decades Providence has reinvented itself by returning to the historic rivers upon which the city was founded. Providence uncovered and moved the rivers to create a new district, complete with

development and a linear riverfront park system. The result catapulted Providence to the top of international lists of destination cities.

The river continues to play an essential role in commerce, culture, and public space, as development prospers along the riverbanks from Olneyville to the hurricane barrier. A new pedestrian bridge linking Fox Point with the I-195 Redevelopment District will bring us closer to an integrated and continuous river walk that will be the envy of any city.

WaterFire, the iconic living sculpture that has come to symbolize Providence's renaissance around the world, attracts more than one million visitors to the Providence River annually with a statewide economic impact of \$114 million and support of 1,300 jobs. Visitors to WaterFire contribute nearly \$10 million in state and city sales tax each year.

That success and future prosperity is at risk because we have not cared for this vital infrastructure. The grand vision was a river teeming with water-based activities, but siltation now leaves the water too shallow for boats. At low tide the rivers have visible, smelly mud flats. This is hardly an attraction for our residents and businesses, nor

for continued tourism and other economic activity.

A healthy urban river requires constant attention and periodic renewal, including dredging. Silt and debris accumulate along the riverbed, reducing the navigable waterway, damaging drains, increasing the threat of urban flooding, endangering the bay, and blighting the river's natural beauty. We can and must do better.

The Green Economy and Clean Water Bond, currently under consideration by the General Assembly for placement on the ballot in the fall, addresses many critical statewide natural resource priorities. A modest addition of \$7 million to that bond would fund a dredging project, which will restore the Providence River system and ensure the health of this critical economic and natural asset for years to come. We urge the General Assembly to add this small but mighty project to the bond, and we call upon the voters of Rhode Island to approve this investment in our collective future and assure that our rivers remain vital for all to enjoy.

— Russell Carey is chair of The Providence Foundation. Barnaby Evans is executive director of WaterFire Providence.

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