

Statement before the Energy Facilities Siting Board, 6/11/03

THE IMPACT OF NEW OVERHEAD POWER LINES ON THE PROVIDENCE WATERFRONT

My name is David Riley. I am Co-Chair of Friends of India Point Park, a group of citizens working to protect, improve, and expand the Park that Mayor Cicilline has called "the entering crown jewel of the city." And that was before the new playground was built at the foot of Gano Street. If you go to the playground - and I urge you to go - you will find something quite extraordinary.

You will find people relaxing, enjoying the sun, the trees, and the hammocks with a beautiful view of the Bay, and maybe a spectacular sunset. You will see seagulls and small boats on the river. You will see children climbing on safe, challenging state-of-the-art equipment. And you will see and hear such a mixture of races and languages that it will seem like a miniature UN. This kind of intermingling - absolutely crucial to the civic health of the city - is what Frederick Law Olmsted talked about 130 years ago when he described Central Park in New York.

If you go to the playground a year from now, you will find a curved retaining wall covered with a colorful tile mural made by the community portraying the rich maritime history of Fox Point that stretches back to Roger Williams and the bustling seaport that grew up here. It sent ships to the Indies, hence the name India Point, and was a major engine powering Rhode Island's colonial economy.

Overhead you will see high-voltage transmission wires, which Narragansett Electric proposes to move closer to the playground - substantially lowering the height of the wires, and moving their path a little closer as well.

Thirty years ago this playground was a railroad yard. The greenspace next to it was a scrap metal yard. We have two people with us tonight who were intimately involved in creating this jewel for the city: Peggy Sharpe and Bob Schacht. Thank you Peggy and Bob for your work.

The transformation of this stretch of shoreline from industrial wasteland into beautiful parkland represents only a small part of why new overhead power lines would have "a significant impact on the environment and public welfare." (The dictionary defines "environment" broadly as the "conditions affecting...an individual or community," and "welfare" as "health, happiness, prosperity, and general well-being.")

Providence is a changed and a changing city. What was not long ago called "Providump" is now the "Renaissance City." We made downtown railroad yards into attractive river walks which have done wonders for our economy and for our image. This is now a city with a buzz that draws new residents and tens of thousands of visitors. A million people come to Waterfire every year.

In this changing city, Narragansett Electric proposes to build new overhead power lines in almost the same place as they have been for many years. But the city is not in the same place as it was when the wires were put there. That is the core of our argument: it is because of the profound changes in Providence that new overhead power lines on the waterfront would have a huge impact on the environment and the public welfare.

If you allow the proposed transmission wires to be built, you will in effect be saying that there is nothing special about the waterfront, that we need not take our stewardship of it seriously, and that we are free to deface it as if it were any old piece of land.

In fact the Providence waterfront is the city's greatest natural resource. It is the cradle of our history. It is the repository of our identity. It is the signature landscape of the Capital City of the Ocean State, viewed by ten million travelers passing through the state on Route 195 every year. And most important, just as it was 200 years ago - it is the cornerstone of our economic future.

Why? Because it has the most untapped potential to attract visitors to the city. When the river walks are extended and open onto the waterfront, as the plans call for; when Heritage Harbor draws 300,000 visitors a year; when a continuous waterfront greenway stretches from the linear park beginning in East Providence through India Point Park to Waterplace Park and beyond, this waterfront will be an invaluable asset that people will swarm to - as they do to San Antonio's riverfront park which now outdraws even the hallowed ground of the Alamo.

They have carefully and deliberately hidden the power lines on San Antonio's riverfront - and look what it has gotten them. They are doing the same thing in Chattanooga and St. Petersburg, and have done it in Annapolis - burying waterfront power lines because it makes economic sense.

Government has a responsibility to govern with a view down the road. Erecting obtrusive wires on our waterfront now would amount to shooting ourselves in the foot down the road - a road which is already planned out and about to be built.

-- If economic development today meant industrial and manufacturing development, as it once did, you could argue these proposed power lines would not have a significant impact.

-- If our urban parks were the neglected wastelands they were 30 years ago, you could argue this proposal would not have a significant impact.

-- If Rhode Island didn't have a \$4.8 billion tourism industry, you could argue this proposal might not have a significant impact.

But today tourism is the second largest sector in the state's economy, providing 65,000 jobs. Today urban parks are flourishing all over the country. New York City's Bryant Park, half a city block once known as "Needle Park," now attracts 4,800 people on a sunny day. It's the same story in Chicago's Grant Park, along Boston's Charles River, and in riverfront parks in San Antonio, Hartford, Louisville, Chattanooga, and here in Providence where India Point Park, Roger Williams Park, and others are being reclaimed as attractive civic gathering places and acclaimed as invaluable assets for making our cities more livable.

Some people try to dismiss parks and burying power lines as "mere" aesthetics - extraneous fluff that we can't afford. But in today's post-industrial era, economic development is inseparable from aesthetics - and no more so than here in what Governor Carcieri calls the "unique ocean setting" of Rhode Island. Last fall the Economic Policy Council, the Public Expenditures Council, and the Rhode Island Foundation brought together more than 100 people to focus on enhancing our "quality of place." Governor-elect Carcieri told the convocation that this agenda is at the heart of his economic strategy.

As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, you cannot stand twice in the same river. The proposal before you would do exactly that: it would rebuild an unsightly fixture of the industrial era, stretching it across the waterfront that is the centerpiece of our post-industrial future.

Providence, like everywhere else, is giving itself a post-industrial makeover - and has met with phenomenal success that we must build upon. We have merged economic value and aesthetic value.

-- Is Benefit Street today an aesthetic experience, or an important economic benefit to the city? Clearly, it is both.

-- Or Waterfire. Meticulously designed down to the last aesthetic detail by a practicing artist, it injects \$20 million a year into our economy. Is it an aesthetic success or an economic one? Clearly both.

-- Even the phrase, "the Ocean State," with every splash of salt spray it evokes, embodies the merger of economics and aesthetics.

It's not that we can't afford to bury these power lines. If we are to be competitive in making Providence a destination, we can't afford not to. Given the far-reaching negative impact of overhead wires on the waterfront, it would be penny-wise and pound-foolish not to take advantage of this chance to bury them. The river walks jump started the city's renaissance. Now burying the waterfront power lines will finish the job they began.

The difficult economic times we face today are all the more reason to put in place the infrastructure that will enhance our economic future when we have the opportunity to do so dropped in our lap. If we do not to that - if we forgo burying these wires because of our current financial straits - we will be in effect choosing a permanent "solution" to a temporary problem, and that choice is a recipe for later regret.

In addition to the huge impact the proposed power lines would have on the city's economic future, there is also a very specific, dramatic impact on the environment that few people are aware of: new overhead power lines would become a far more prominent feature on the waterfront than they are now. Here's why:

In the next few years, Transportation Department projects will create four major vantage points that don't exist today. Each of those vantage points, presumably intended to feature appealing water views, would in fact feature views of the proposed power lines. The vantage points are these:

1. The new 195 bridge over the Providence River: travelers looking north from the bridge toward the dramatic downtown Providence skyline will have the power lines in their direct line of vision.

2. The new linear park and bike path on the Washington Bridge: people enjoying the newly accessible water views from the bridge looking south down the Seekonk River will see the power lines dominating their view.

3. The new pedestrian bridge over 195: When the existing bridge, currently encaged in chain link fencing, is replaced by a wider bridge open to the sky, the power lines will dominate that sky for those heading toward India Point Park and the Bay.

4. The westbound lane of India Street, bordering the Park, will look like it's headed right into one of the proposed utility poles whose wires will also overshadow the India Street exit and entrance ramps. Instead of being the little used roadway it is today, India Street will become a

heavily traveled access road for 195, so not only will the power lines be more prominent than they are now on India Street, but also tens of thousands more motorists will have the chance to see them than do now.

We applaud much of the work the Transportation Department proposes to do on the waterfront, particularly the improved pedestrian bridge and the Seekonk River park and bike path. But the right hand of government should work in unison with the left, not at cross purposes. The city and the state will be poorly served if one agency spends several hundred million dollars upgrading the waterfront while another allows it to be permanently defaced with overhead power lines - a defacement that would actually be highlighted by the upgrading.

We appreciate your listening to our views. In conclusion, we believe that the negative impact of the proposed power lines would be not only significant, but incalculable and would reach at least three generations into the future. For that reason, we urge the Board to conduct a full open, public review of this application. The relocation of 195 will change the waterfront so dramatically that it will be like performing plastic surgery on the face of the city. These proposed power lines would leave a permanent scar on its forehead. That is a horrible prospect, and we urge you to prevent it from happening.