

Beating the drum for tourists: Hartford leads by a mile

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HARTFORD, Conn. — This capital city of the Nutmeg State is remarkably similar to Rhode Island's capital city both in terms of historical development and present day status. But there is one striking difference: the ability and commitment to "sell" itself.

Although the Dutch earlier had established a fort in Hartford, it was the settlement in both areas by discontented English settlers led by men of the church from nearby Massachusetts in 1636 from which both cities trace their origins. In time these settlements became ports but Hartford, with its inland location, lost this importance early in the 19th century while insurance, which started with the maritime trade, prospered, as did its industrial development.

Both cities are government centers and both had to share this capital city status for a time; Hartford with New Haven and Providence with Newport. And both state

capitals were built within 20 years of each other.

Hartford was the largest city in the state but the continuing loss of population from a high of 177,000 in 1950 to its current 135,000 has dropped it behind Bridgeport. Providence's loss from 254,000 in 1940 to its present 165,000 is more dramatic, but our capital city is still well ahead of Warwick's 90,000. Both Hartford and Providence house their respective populations on 18 square miles of land.

Both capital cities have disproportionate numbers of elderly, poor and minorities, although blacks and Spanish speaking represent close to 40 percent of the population in Hartford but just over 10 percent in Providence.

Two historic cities of the Northeast, both beset by urban problems common to old cities, yet Hartford has done, and is doing a better job of promoting itself as a city to be seen and enjoyed. This year, as a result, it will do a \$20 million convention and tourist business compared to the \$3 million estimated for Providence.

There are many, including this writer

and several Hartford residents, who feel that Providence has more to sell in terms of history, architecture, downtown, waterfront location and human scale than does Hartford, yet that city does nearly seven times the tourist business than does our capital city. Why is this so?

The reasons are many but, likely, one would single out the local inferiority complex and resultant negative attitude about our city. Too few are working to turn this attitude around and instill pride in the city. And, more importantly, there is little promotion of Providence as a place to visit when compared with cities such as Hartford.

In that city there is a recognition that the convention and tourist industry brings people to the city where they spend up to \$60 daily of "outside money" on restaurants, hotels, motels, cabs, shops, etc. For this reason the greater Hartford Convention and Visitors Bureau, Inc. has a budget of nearly \$500,000 and employs 14 people to convince potential visitors that their time and money should be spent in Hartford. In addition, the Downtown Council with its \$250,000 budget and staff of six devotes considerable time to

downtown promotion, from publishing "The Beat of Hartford" to coordinating activities of the more than 30 arts organizations of the city.

In Providence, by contrast, the three year old Greater Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau has a staff of three, a budget of \$90,000 (\$30,000 from the city; \$10,000 from the state; and \$50,000 from the private sector), and must also contend with a lack of full commitment to the potential of this business. Four major restaurants in Providence and one motel provide absolutely no help to promote the city and thereby help their own businesses. This lack of cooperation with the bureau also extends to brewery and factories alike, none of which provides tours for visitors to our city.

A common funding method is used by Hartford's bureau, with \$100,000 coming from private donations and \$400,000 raised from the four and one-half cents of the seven cents per dollar sales tax levied on hotel and motel room rents. Filling the 1,700 such rooms in Hartford serves as an incentive to the bureau in order to increase their budget. A room rate levy has been recommended by the mayor of

Providence but the proposal died in committee of the last General Assembly.

More restaurants, increased night life, solid hotel bookings and considerable downtown activity are proof of the effective work of the Hartford bureau and the downtown council. It is happening in Hartford because such organizations "sell" the city and have the solid backing of the business community. This is what is needed in Providence.

Unless Providence chooses to remain as "New England's Best Kept Secret" and miss a great opportunity for more jobs and business based on visiting conventioners and tourists, there must be a better and stronger commitment from the business sector than currently exists and room tax legislation to provide the funding necessary for an expansion of the city. In the words of the sales manager at the Hartford bureau, "When are you people in Providence going to get your act together?"

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