

A tale of two cities, similar, but also quite different

PBN Aug 7-13, 2002

Five years ago I wrote a column for this paper about a visit to Worcester, especially to explore the newly opened Worcester Fashion Common Outlets. When I told my daughter who works in the area that I was going for a weekend in Worcester, she asked "Why?" The report that I wrote was not a positive one.

So when I had the opportunity to visit that city again for a weekend, I decided to go and see what changes have taken place. When I told another daughter who lives in New Jersey that we were visiting Worcester for the weekend, she also asked "Why?"

I like and study cities, so again I asked my wife to come along with me to give me her impressions as well, especially since we would visit again the Worcester Common Outlets (Fashion has been dropped from the name).

Both Providence and Worcester gained population from 1980 to 1990, and Worcester still holds its position as second largest city of New England with 170,000 residents, closely followed by Providence at 161,000. Estimates from the U.S. Census for 1998 indicate a loss of 3,000 for Worcester and 10,000 for Providence.

"Heart of the Commonwealth" is the way the AAA TourBook describes Worcester with its central location, with access to other parts of New England. True, but unless there is something to draw the visitor initially, that location alone will not do it.

Downtown malls may help revive a city center. The Worcester Common Outlets, an unusual mall with many discount major retailers in it, caused much excitement initially and hope for a revived downtown. But the nearly empty

garage on a Friday night, the relatively few shoppers on an early Saturday and the quick count of at least 25 empty shops raise some questions about its viability.

Interestingly, Providence Place, similar in size to that in Worcester, has recently opened and, although not yet completely filled, it has done well as an attraction and in a business sense.

We were told that Worcester has a high quality of life, strong neighborhoods, a healthy middle class and a strong community cohesiveness that was recently revealed in the tragedy of the firefighters. Certainly, with a medical school, university, several colleges, Centrum, rehabbed Union Station and the new medical complex downtown, there will be an attraction for the city and its center, but movement outward along Shrewsbury Street and other areas draws away from the center.

This is where Providence has had more success: Its river relocation, enhanced amenities, many nationally recognized restaurants, outstanding theater, nationally recognized architecture, art work associated with an art school, an active night life and WaterFire event continue to draw visitors and tourists alike.

Worcester, like Providence, has to work to maintain its viability.

Chester E. Smolski, a retired Professor of Geography at Rhode Island College, writes regularly for this newspaper.

commentary

CHET SMOLSKI