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Impressions of Providence

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A recent Letter to the Editor of this newspaper pointed out part of the problem of our capital city. Whether one agrees with the writer or not, it is important to consider what he said because this is the image of the city which he carried away with him.

He visited Providence for only two days before returning to his home in Indianapolis but he took the time to send a letter to report his feelings. Yes, he did say that the people were helpful in giving directions but he also said the downtown was filled with raucous drunks and more homosexuals than he had seen before in a city. Like it or not, rightly or wrongly, this is the impression a visitor had of our downtown and, I imagine, this is the way he talks about our capital city to his friends.

Whether his perceptions of the city are true or not, one gets an extremely negative view from what he had to say. It is, of course, also true that many Rhode Islanders, as well as city residents, also have an extremely negative image of the city for one reason or another. And yet this is their city, their capital and their major urban center to which any visitor to this state will usually come. Are we as Rhode Islanders willing to accept these pejorative remarks about our most important city? Are we willing to turn our heads away from a city which has the greatest potential to be one of the best smaller cities in the entire Northeast? Do we have any pride in our own state capital?

To be proud is one of those intangibles that is difficult to pinpoint yet easily recognized. San Franciscans take great pride in their city and take special delight in enumerating its special charms. London, Paris and New Orleans, yes, even New York City, elicit from their residents a distinct feeling of positiveness about their respective cities. Pride alone does not make a good city, but it must start there. But pride has to be built on something tangible. Where does it start?

Sometimes, simple things will help. For instance, a woman from Hoboken, New Jersey to whom I was speaking told me that she drove into the city and never knew it. Why? Because there were no signs to indicate the entrance to the city.

Why, for instance, are there not signs posted along major roads into the city announcing Providence as the home of religious freedom in this country, as a major jewelry center, as the home of Roger Williams or some other significant aspect about our heritage? Why are there not maps in the downtown to help visitors and residents find their way about the city?

Why is perhaps one of the best architectural vistas in the city along South Main Street, i.e., the Courthouse, Old Stone, Brown house and Market Place, not illuminated at night to show the beauty of our buildings? (Many of our lovely churches could also be illuminated to show, as do many other cities, the glorious artistic detailing to be found on these buildings.) Not much, perhaps, but a start toward building an element of respect for our capital city as well as a more positive image.

One of the best image builders of a city is its people. If these people are not helpful and rude, then lighted buildings will add little to a positive image.

The most visible city people are the police. Are they courteous? Are they helpful? Are they "sharp" in their appearance and are they professional? These are questions to be asked of these potential good-will ambassadors. The police play an important role in image building.

Creating a positive image takes time. It also requires help, for Providence cannot do it alone, even with city and private interests working together. This help needs also to come from the state. The highest ranking elected official in this state is the Governor, a man who both lives and works in our capital city. He, together with members of the General Assembly have it within their power to help turn Providence around. The location of state offices, state courts and roads, among others, can be sited to aid the city. This capital city does not exist in isolation: it belongs to all of us.

It is not an easy task to turn the image of a city around. The razing of historic buildings in the downtown for parking lots will not help; the bastardizing of historic building facades will not help; and the attitudes of residents who join together to get from the city rather than do for the city will not help.

The most visible part of any city is its downtown and the image of a city normally comes from one's experience in this location. Will such terms as dull, featureless, dirty, depressing and vapid describe the Providence downtown; or will style, grace and elegance better depict what our downtown will be for us and for visitors?

It is in our hands to create a positive image of Providence, a city in which all can take pride. But it will not happen unless all of us want it to happen and do what is necessary, at all levels of government and throughout the private sector, to make it happen. As Rhode Islanders are we willing to help create a quality city?

A healthy downtown has many people of great variety, and thus those individuals whom some find offensive do not stand apart from the others: this is the answer to that part of the downtown problem raised by the visitor from Indianapolis.

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