

Teaching jobs, housing and implications ready for Providence's lap

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For the first time in 15 years, Providence has news for those seeking teaching positions. There will be about 70 new openings in the next year as a result of about 50 impending retirements this year and an expected increase in enrollments of more than 500 next year. The short-term impact of the new teaching positions will be to bring young teachers into the schools and, in the long term, effect a major impact in the community.

The city of Providence suffered one of the greatest losses of population of all cities in the nation in the period from just before World War II to 1980, the last time the numbers were counted. During that 40-year period, Providence, on average, lost 2,417 residents every year. Reaching its lowest point in the early 1980s at about 155,000, the trend has reversed itself and the numbers are starting to increase, with current city population estimated at 160,000. This gain has resulted from two outside forces over which Providence has little control: high house prices in the Boston area and the greater number of immigrants finding their way here, primarily from Southeast Asia.

The increased demand for housing by Boston area workers looking for housing in the city has

contributed to driving up house prices by 37 percent in the last quarter of 1986 — highest figure for all cities in the nation. And the fewer than 1,700 Asians in Providence in 1980 has exploded by nine times to an estimated 15,000. Their impact on school enrollments has been pronounced, so that 55 percent of the school population is black, Hispanic and Asian.

The former declining population of Providence and its decreasing school enrollments were manifested in closed and abandoned school buildings, but this has changed, and now with its recent purchase of St. Mary's, the city can look forward to greater utilization of all school buildings and some new additions — something unheard of two years ago.

The combination of increased school enrollments and cost cutting by the city in offering incentives to older teachers that resulted in 50 early retirements, opens the door for 70 new positions, some of which will go to long-term substitutes who have previously worked here. But the future infusion of new and young teachers into an older school system is a vital step for continuing improvements in the schools, and this will be the short-term effect of these new hirings.

The long-term effect of these new jobs will come from a controversial provision of the Home Rule Charter stating that, from 1983 forward, per-

sons employed by the city must live there. Contested by firefighters and teachers, this provision has gained the approval of the courts within the past six months.

When the issue of residency requirements was being debated during hearings on the proposed charter, the point was made that city employees contribute more than just spending their money in the city, for when they live here, there is also a commitment to the community. This commitment by workers is to seek improved schools, cleaner streets, reduced crime and a host of better services, for these upwardly mobile people have the energy, money, education and organization to make it happen. Residency requirements is a step in the right direction to bring about an improvement in the quality of city living, but in the case of Providence, this may not be easily accomplished.

The 70 new hirings may include some teachers who live here, but many will come from outside the city and will be looking for housing. Added to this number will be the 49 recently graduated recruits of the police academy who, the mayor has wisely concluded in working with minority leaders, will be on the city payroll by July, and many of them will be looking for housing. The 40 currently employed teachers and firefighters who were given until September to move to the city will create further pressures for these 160 or so city employees to

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find good housing. This is a problem of which the city should be aware and should start to address.

Affordable housing is a problem for low-income persons and will be for new municipal employees who are required to live in the city as a result of that employment. As more of the older employees who live outside the city retire (it is estimated that two-thirds of the city's teachers are not

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Providence residents) and are replaced by new persons required to live here, there could likely be pressures made to reverse residency requirements. That would be unfortunate at this early stage, because this measure is a way to return middle America to the city. But it is also incumbent on the city to ensure that housing is available for these new persons. In view of this first push of new city employees looking for housing this summer, the city should be ready to help and demonstrate that working for Providence is working for a good employer.

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