

COMMENTARY/ **Chester E. Smolski**

# Visiting Worcester makes one appreciate Providence

A friend of mine works in the Worcester area, so I thought she would be the one to ask about things to do there. When I told her that we were going to New England's second largest city for the weekend, she asked "Why?"

The purpose of the trip was to see the Worcester Common Fashion Outlets, and since we were there we thought we'd explore some city attractions, try some restaurants and compare this larger city against our own Providence.

My friend claims that Worcester is nothing more than Woonsocket grown large, and that it doesn't have the history, character, beauty and general ambience to be found in our own capital city. Based on our limited time there, I believe she is right.

We had lived in Worcester for two years about 30 years ago, but as a graduate student with family, there was little time and money to really discover a city. But even though my experience was limited, I must admit that even then Worcester did not have much appeal.

The guide books list some museums in the city but very little else. Still intent on discovery, we took a hotel in the downtown from which we could walk to the Fashion Outlets, explore places in between and find some good restaurants. After all, this is the type of activity that satisfies when exploring Providence.

Additionally, we looked at the Friday evening paper because that is where one finds lists of things to do for weekend entertainment. Locally, *The Providence Journal* has a list that spreads over several pages; by comparison, *The Worcester Telegram* has nothing. The only entertainment we found was listed under "Cinemas." After walking around the nearly deserted downtown, we settled for a movie on television in the hotel room.

Well, Saturday would be the big day, with most of the time to be spent at the newly renovated Worcester Common Fashion Outlets. Breakfast should have been just a short walk away, but trying to find a decent breakfast eatery was not easy. We got in the car and drove to breakfast.

The Worcester Common Fashion Outlets, according to the National Research Bureau of Chicago, is the third largest factory outlet center in the nation. At one million square feet, approximately the size of the Warwick Mall, it is also claimed to be the largest enclosed outlet mall. The 4,000 parking-spaces-five-level parking garage which curves around two sides of the complex was the largest in the world when it was built in 1971 for the original Worcester Center Galleria.

Some old industrial buildings occupied the site in the 1960s, but the federally sponsored Urban Renewal Program provided most of the funds to the Worcester Redevelopment Authority for clearing the site in 1969. Two years later, with streets realigned and utilities in place, the arched, plexiglassed-topped, 475 feet long "galleria," with over 100 shops on four levels facing this walkway, opened to

glowing reports on the future of downtown retailing. The decision by Jordan Marsh to pull out in 1991 capped the demise of the Galleria: ironically, it was the decision by Jordan Marsh in 1971 to locate here — the first time it located downtown since it opened its Boston store — that helped bring about the Galleria's opening.

Now a new form of retailing, discount factory outlets, has taken over the site. New England Development, with its two partners, believe this type of selling, also found in Kittery, Me. and Fall River, Mass. is what consumers want today. Early reports on sales before Christmas may prove them right, although the reportedly large number of short term leases taken out by retailers may indicate these merchants are hedging their bets.

The Fashion Outlets is different also in having carpeting throughout; the first mall in New England to have this feature. Normally, malls have floors and walls from which sound bounces so that the noise gives the sense of activity, even when few people are present. It was a strange sensation to have many Christmas shoppers there on a Saturday and not be surrounded by sounds common to malls.

After spending several hours there and picking up a few Christmas gifts, it was time to walk back to the hotel. I asked the shopper, my wife, if she would want to come back to do some serious shopping here again. Her answer: "No."

Our curiosity satisfied, we searched out a place for dinner. And that wasn't easy either. We finally stumbled upon a place that I remembered from years ago, and it satisfied our needs. But walking and driving around the city center looking for a restaurant made us appreciate Providence with its many fine choices.

Driving back home that night, only 50 miles from Providence, we talked about the role that the Worcester Common Fashion Outlets would have on revitalizing the city center. Garage parking is expensive, unless you spend \$25 in the shops; the city has few attractions compared with Providence; architecturally and aesthetically there is little beauty in the downtown; the many empty downtown shops will not be filled because of the competition from the Outlets; and this tired old industrial city does not have the sense of vitality that is common even in the old industrial city of Providence.

Whether there is a Providence Place constructed in Providence or not, the capital city of Rhode Island has much to offer its residents and tourists alike. That is the principal conclusion we reached after spending a weekend in Worcester.

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