

# OPINION

COMMENTARY/ **Chester E. Smolski**

## Urban areas offer opportunities for real discoveries

Many of us love, and long for, wide-open spaces, especially when coming from this crowded Northeastern part of the nation. And whenever time and money allow, we seek those quiet and serene spaces in order to get away from the rush and confusion of our own crowded landscape.

It may be the open spaces of the desert in the Southwest; the bucolic setting of the rural and rustic Vermont countryside; the peaceful environs of the Indiana farmstead; the flat and open plains of the Dakotas; the solitude of a quiet brook in the woods of Maine; or it might be a boat, to sail out into the bay or ocean to be alone with nature — this is the revival of spirit that refreshes the soul.

A friend of mine worked for a newspaper in Tucson, Ariz., and when the pressures of work became too great, he would hop into the car, drive 15 minutes into the desert, get out of the car, find a place to sit and then contemplate the mountains, the sky and the grandeur of the landscape. After 15 minutes of this experience, he was ready to go back to work, at ease with himself and the world.

Living near the water, as we do, we have the same opportunities to get away, especially if one has a boat, and commune with nature in this way. For many Rhode Islanders, getting away from the crowd is part of the joy of boating.

Yet, as idyllic and desirable as these open spaces may appear to be, there is still one major advantage that the crowded parts of our region have that must not be overlooked, that of opportunity.

Because people and places are close together, this means that if one loses a job, one can still live at home and get another position close by. In a crowded region if one cannot find a dentist, doctor, car dealership or whatever, the likelihood will be that there will be opportunity to find a comparable service or product in close proximity.

This is a major selling point for Providence. In the early days when faculty positions opened up at Rhode Island College and we had to sell the idea of locating in Providence, we would always make mention of the great libraries close by in Boston or even New York where research could be conducted. In today's market for faculty positions, when hundreds of applications come in for one position, be this chemistry or English, it is not necessary to use this point to convince new faculty to come here.

But proximity is still a major strength for this crowded part of the nation. We must remember that Rhode Island has the second highest population density in the nation, with close to 1,000 people for every square mile of land, followed closely by the third and fourth ranked states of Massachusetts and Connecticut, respectively.

What this means is that all kinds and types of opportunities are close by, located primarily in our cities. Of the 195 cities in the country with a population of more than 100,000, 10 of them are located in these three states. (None of the large cities are found in the three northern New

England states.) Connecticut's largest city, Bridgeport, with a population of 142,000 and home of the P.T. Barnum Museum, is just over a two hour drive from Providence.

Boston, 20th city in the nation, with 574,000 residents, is home to museums, colleges, shops, history and a host of other points of interest that make it one of the most attractive cities of the country. Worcester, also a one hour drive from Providence, is the second largest city of New England, at 170,000, and home to the father of rocketry, Robert Goddard, with the Goddard Museum located at Clark University where he was educated and taught.

Providence is the third largest city in New England, at 160,000. And just under two hours from the capital city is the fourth city of the region, Springfield, Massachusetts, with its 157,000 population and home of the Basketball Hall of Fame, this being the founding city of the sport in 1891.

After Bridgeport, fifth largest, come the next four cities of the region and all in Connecticut: Hartford, capital city of 140,000 and home of Mark Twain for 17 years and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," both houses located next to each other; seventh city of the region, New Haven, at 130,000, and home of Yale University, more than 60 years older than Brown University; Waterbury, at 109,000, is a major brass manufacturing center and home to a glider soaring center; and Stamford, with 108,000 residents, home of the Bartlett Arboretum and the branch of the Whitney Mu-

seum of American Art from New York City.

Home to the largest, free, folk festival in the country, which drew a crowd of 250,000 this year for the last weekend of July festivities, Lowell, with 103,000 residents and 10th city of New England, is located just over one hour from Providence.

The festival is a weekend delight, with six stages featuring live bands that played country, Polish, Armenian, rock and a variety of other music, exhibited crafts and featured foods from around the world, all of this reflecting the city's rich ethnic mix. If time permits, visits to the National Historical Park, in this first "planned industrial city" in the country with its trolleys, canal boat rides and fascinating tours through mills, boarding houses and buildings that made the city one of the major textile centers of the region, will give a full appreciation of what the industrial revolution meant in human terms.

True enough, the wide open spaces may bring solitude and a brief respite from the crowded and sometimes hectic area of southern New England, but the real discovery, excitement, understanding and appreciation of our past and sense of who we are comes from our many nearby cities. They are there with their opportunities: visit and learn from them. You will be the wiser and more understanding for it.

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