

Worcester's Future

Wesley J. Christenson

Worcester.

The very thought of it brings unpleasant memories to graduates of Holy Cross, Clark, Worcester Tech, Assumption and the city's other colleges. An overgrown milltown, with smokestacks gushing. Low-paid ethnics leaving their three-deckers with bologna sandwiches in their lunchpails to toil at unsightly shoe and textile factories. Ugly, depressing Southbridge Street. And a decaying, seedy downtown offensive to the eye.

It was enough to make the collegians go to Boston. And they did. Often. Rare indeed was the graduate of a Worcester college or university who stayed in the city to make a living, unless he was a hometown boy.

Worcester, in a word, was not where it was "at." Some graduates never returned — even for football. They went home to Scarsdale or Scranton or Syracuse with nary a good word to say about the city where they had spent those four formative years of their lives.

Today's Worcester is still not a modern-day Garden of Eden, and mobile long-haired collegians, conscious that all roads still lead to Boston, hitchhike in droves on Friday afternoon to the Hub. But it's a safe bet their impressions of Worcester aren't as negative as their parents or older siblings who went to Holy Cross or Clark. For one thing, they have discovered sociology — and Worcester is a sociological laboratory with its array of ethnic groups.

There's also a feeling in the air — on campus and in the community — that Worcester is beginning to move, fueled by a gigantic 250th anniversary celebration last summer in which old animosities were buried. The ethnic groups came down from their seven hills to make civic merry. Swedes ate kielbasi with the Poles, and Protestant Yankees worked side by side with Italians in building floats for a parade that tied up the city's traffic for hours.

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WORCESTER, AT LAST, HAS FALLEN ON PROSPEROUS ECONOMIC TIMES

That headline over a *Boston Globe* story last summer may have overstated the case a bit but it symbolized a new era of good feelings in Worcester.

By no stretch of the imagination has Worcester escaped the economic troubles that other cities have encountered. But it has not lost jobs in such large numbers as other New England cities in recent years, and those it has seen fall by the wayside are being replaced by new white-collar positions in the retail-wholesale trade and service and health industries.

In addition, Worcester never suffered huge reductions in its work force that accompanied the current slowdown in defense spending. Its impact was minimal — unlike neighboring Route 128 near Boston.

Alberico Patruno, manager of Worcester's State Employment Service, said the rate of job losses in manufacturing has been slowed. Employment will increase this year and the next, if the national economy continues to show improvement, he said.

In short, Worcester is on the rebound after having hit the bottom in the late 1950's and the early 1960's.

A good part of the city's resurgence — in spirit, at least — can be traced to ambitious downtown renewal, most visibly evidenced by the opening in July 1971 of the huge Worcester Center indoor shopping mall which replaced 34 blocks of downtown decay in the Front Street area.

The \$130-million project now has nearly 75 stores in operation and the world's largest parking garage with a capacity for 4300 cars. It has attracted urban designers and architects from around the nation and attention for the city in national magazines, including *Fortune*.

Local cynics contend the Worcester Center isn't doing well, that it is ruining the nearby Main Street shopping center across the newly revived Common, and that it's an economic white elephant whose early glamor has worn off.

That's nonsense, insists Edward C. Maher, a 1940 Holy Cross graduate who's a lawyer, developer, real estate expert, savings bank official, public servant, civic leader and orator, all rolled into one.



"Worcester?? A future???"

More than any one else, Ed Maher is the one man — the moving force — responsible for Worcester Center. One of the "hats" he has worn for nearly ten years is that of head of the Worcester Redevelopment Authority, the overseer of the city's urban renewal efforts.

He dismisses talk that Worcester Center is faring badly, or that Main Street has been hurt, by pointing to business statistics. "Look at Jordan Marsh (the department store in the Center that's the largest retail outlet in Worcester County) and what they have done," he countered. "The Center has been open less than 18 months, and Jordan Marsh sales are already at the three-year level."

Mr. Maher also points to the success of a branch office of his Home Federal Savings in the Center. "We had a savings net of \$7 million, and that broke all records for any branch bank in the United States. You couldn't do that if people weren't shopping at Worcester Center."

Nor does he believe that Main Street has been damaged severely by the new urban renewal project. "Worcester Center has served as a catalyst for Main Street," he argued. "It has brought people into the area. Sure, a few Main Street stores

moved into the Center, but they are being replaced by a number of new ones."

His views are echoed by Mel Singer, who has covered the financial scene in Worcester for nearly six years for *The Evening Gazette*. "Worcester Center has generated a lot of traffic around the Common," he said. "Of course, it takes time to change people's shopping habits. When downtown fell into disrepair, the people started to shop in Boston, Framingham, or even Springfield. Now they are coming back to downtown Worcester, but it will take a while. After all, Worcester Center is little more than a year old."

"What's more," he continued, "Main Street as we know it today will be completely different in a year and a half. There are new concepts of business going into Main Street, and people will accept them. Denholm's just put in a bargain store, as an example. That will help attract shoppers."

New Buildings

The Guaranty Bank and Maher's Home Federal Savings across Main Street are examples of newly completed buildings that have improved the area. In addition, American Telephone

"The Evening Gazette's business and financial writer, Mel Singer, calls himself an outsider who has lived in Florida, Texas, California and New York, and who has some basis for comparison. 'I can remember coming here 15 or 20 years ago and finding Worcester gradually disintegrating. I watched us hit our low period, but now things are beginning to happen. Worcester is on the verge of some tremendous growth. If they put some Worcester stock on the market, I would buy. It's a good investment.'"

and Telegraph recently broke ground for a multi-million dollar structure on Main Street, choosing Worcester over other New England cities. The neighborhood also will be enhanced by a new 22-story apartment and office complex, a project of the Consumers Savings Bank.

The Worcester County National Bank is also putting up a mammoth glass, two-tower structure of 24 and 22 stories each at Main and Pleasant Streets, across the street from the Common and City Hall. The venture at Harrington Corner is known as Worcester Plaza and has set the pace for new construction on Worcester's newly emerging skyline, complementing the new Mechanics Tower two blocks away in Worcester Center. The completion date is late 1973.

The bank's president, Stewart F. Oakes, said banking operations will use about seven or eight of the floors, and rental agents are "moving along quickly in making arrangements for the rest." The top two floors may be used for a downtown luncheon club to be opened for public dining at night, he added.

When he's not overseeing new construction, Oakes is involved in another project to revive downtown Worcester: he is chairman of a private citizens' effort called the Downtown

Advisory Committee which is mulling over a newly completed consultant's study that outlines an action plan for the city in blunt, no-nonsense terms.

Oakes' committee asked Doxiadis Associates, Inc., of Washington, D.C., a well-known and highly respected urban design and planning outfit, to tell Worcester where it should be going.

Doxiadis did, but is also spared no ink in telling Worcester where things had gone wrong. Its preliminary phase one report noted that Worcester had its worst unemployment rate in eleven years in 1971, that the city's downtown was still in a period of "disruption and uncertainty," and that efforts were needed at once to stop the flow of residents from downtown where the median age of its inhabitants is 49. A median income in downtown Worcester of only \$2524 reflects the large percentage of older people, many living on fixed retirement pay, the study noted. The consultants told Worcester to move quickly to begin to double the downtown population, hopefully with young people and those in "the prime productive age groups."

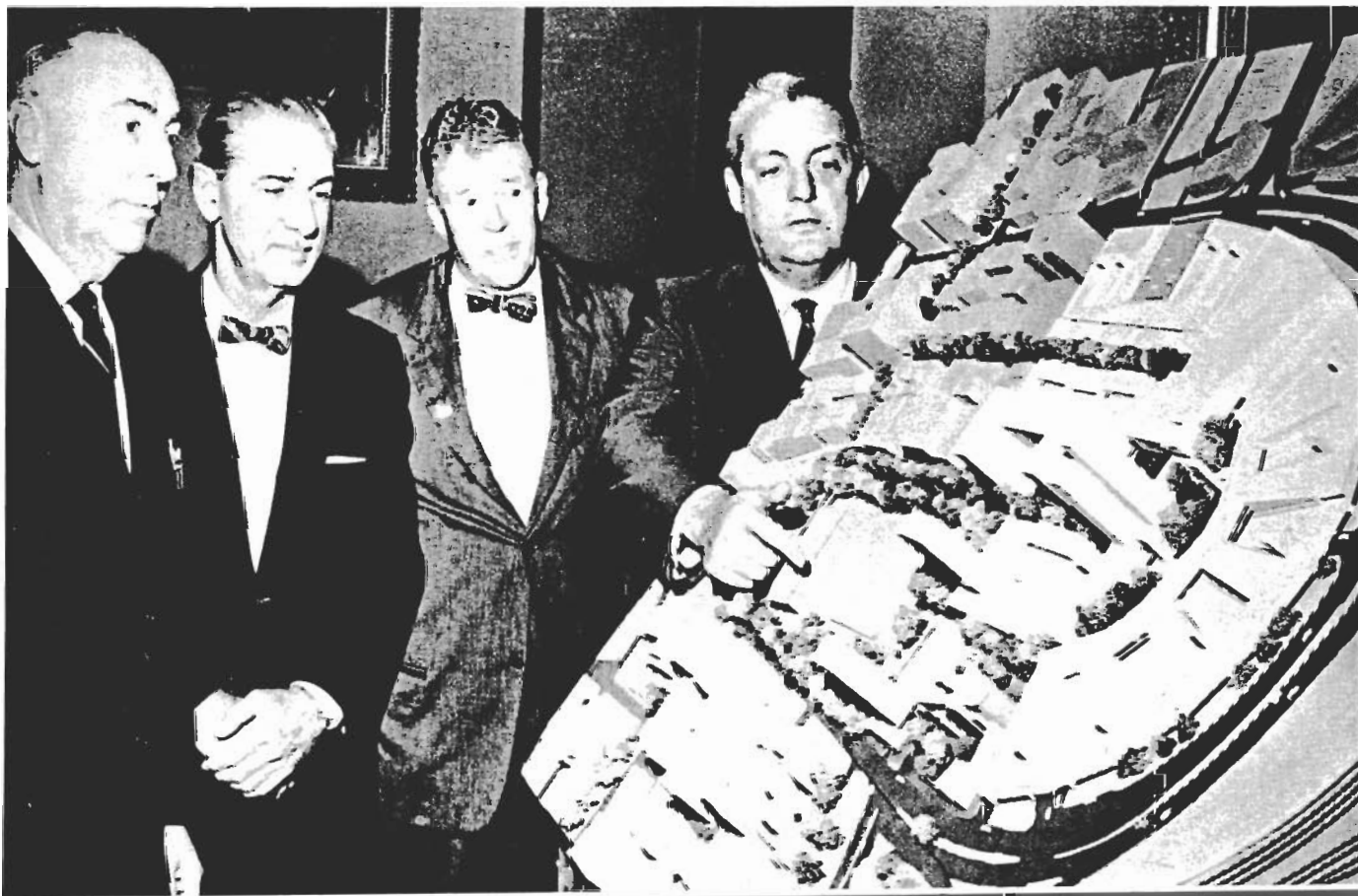
They also told Worcester it has three choices in dealing with its downtown:

- *A do-nothing, laissez faire approach.

- *Strong programs of improvement, consolidating business and retail functions and improving urban amenities.

- *A major planned effort to make Worcester a strong regional center with emphasis on attracting outside investment, new industry, and better transportation and housing.

Redevelopment Authority officials with model of the Worcester Urban Renewal Complex. Left to right: James Lavin, Richard Rutherford, Milton P. Higgins, and Edward C. Maher, head of the Worcester Redevelopment Authority, who will receive in May, 1973, the Isaiah Thomas Award, the city's highest honor for distinguished community service.



"I don't think there's any question about which way we should be heading," Oakes said, puffing on his pipe and ignoring the cacophony of jackhammers in nearby Worcester Plaza. "If we conceive of ourselves as a regional center, we can plan our destiny and develop our strong assets. If we don't, we will just sit here and finally, over a period of time, be engulfed by the expansion of Boston."

He strolled over to his office window and looked out on the Common and the new Worcester Center. "You know, we have had all kinds of problems in Worcester: we lost many industries, people have gone to Boston and Framingham to shop because we let our downtown run down, there have been parking and traffic problems." He lit his pipe. "Do you know that it took us fifteen years to get Interstate 290 completed so we had an expressway through Worcester? And now we are having problems getting Highway 52 on a north-south axis built. It seems that we always need to have a crisis to get our leadership working together. Well, it's time to pull together now. We know what we need."

The consultants also told Oakes and his study group that Worcester should capitalize on its existing assets, including education, health facilities and a "reasonably diversified mix of industries."

City Manager Francis J. McGrath (Holy Cross, '30) is in complete agreement. "The first question business asks when it's thinking of coming in here is: how many and what kinds of colleges do you have? What kind of schools? Worcester has a real strength in having eleven colleges and universities, and an excellent elementary and secondary school system."

New Medical School

He is also optimistic about Worcester as the site for the new University of Massachusetts Medical School. "There will be a whole new area of medical and pharmaceutical-related industries and services coming to Worcester because of that," he said. "This will mean more jobs and greatly improved medical care for the half-million people in the surrounding area. We won't have to look to Boston as our medical center. We have six big hospitals and the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology here. With the addition of the U-Mass Medical School, the city truly will be a regional medical center."

McGrath is also convinced that Worcester must move to attract regional branches of state and federal governmental offices to help supply the white-collar positions the city needs to balance the loss of jobs in manufacturing during the 1950s and 1960s. "It just doesn't make sense to have to go to Boston for most governmental services. When you get there, you sit in a traffic jam, you can't move around, and the price of parking is too high. We have to decentralize our governmental functions."

In the 42 years since he was graduated from Holy Cross and the 21 years as city manager, McGrath (pronounced McGraw) has seen — and presided over — a lot of change. "I'm especially pleased that we have recouped the jobs we lost during our economic downturn of a few years ago," he said. "Ten years ago, Worcester was a sick city economically, and we had to do something about it. The city government and the Chamber of

Commerce began setting up industrial parks throughout the city, fully aware that we had lost about 12,000 industrial jobs over 20 to 25 years. Within four years, we had found nearly 11,000 new jobs, many of them in the service areas, such as insurance or government."

"We also have gained more than we lost in tearing down old buildings and putting up new ones in the redevelopment areas," he continued. "We relocated the great majority of the 291 businesses that had to move, and only six chose to go outside the city. It also was good for the city because we gained back more than \$7.5 million in evaluation in taxable property, in addition to the new Worcester Center. A few companies moved outside the downtown area, but built new structures elsewhere in the city."

McGrath is also proud of Worcester's labor force, known for being more highly skilled and better diversified than those of other comparably sized New England cities. "Eighty per cent of all the foremen and general foremen in Worcester's 800 industries are graduates of Worcester Boys Trade School and the Worcester Industrial Technical Institute," he said. "They have tremendous reputations. One industry came here from Schenectady and wanted to hire the whole graduating class, sight unseen."

However, nearly 70 per cent of the wage and salary earners in the Worcester area are employed in non-manufacturing areas, and the major gains in new jobs are in non-manufacturing. They were led by recent increases of 700, 500 and 400 in service, wholesale and retail trade, and government, respectively. In addition, there's evidence that the plants on Routes 128 and 495, some of them forced to close a year ago, are hiring again, however slowly, and that has had a positive impact upon Worcester. Worcester real estate developers generally say land along Route 495 is "the hottest property in Massachusetts."

Another Worcester asset, according to financial reporter Singer, is the city's labor-management tranquility. "Labor and management, with relatively few exceptions, have gotten along well together here," he said, "and I'm not saying that the unions are non-existent or weak. They are not."

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The new Worcester Center with City Hall in the foreground.

"But we have had industrial peace here and a good deal of cooperative effort," Singer added, "compared to the 'dog-eat-dog' life in labor-management dealings in Boston, Providence or Hartford. There's more mutual respect here."

"We also have an excellent pool of highly skilled labor here. Worcester area products always have been more highly acceptable than those areas where they took unskilled labor and put it on a machine," he continued, adding that he spoke for himself and not *The Evening Gazette*.

Negative Factors

On the debit side, it's generally agreed, is the city's dearth of land for new industry and the parking spaces today's industry needs. Worcester also has a problem shared by other New England cities: distance from most raw products and high costs of transporting New England-manufactured goods. Add to that a slower growth of the New England economy in the past several years with its accompanying out-migration of young people, especially higher-skilled heads-of-family. Also add the growth of suburban and regional shopping centers outside Worcester, as people have fled the city for the suburbs. (The city has been losing population since 1950, and stood at

176,600 residents in the last census, down from 203,500 in 1950.) The suburbs grew, however, but not as fast as others in Massachusetts, New England or the nation as a whole.

Another detriment is the lack of an adequate airport. Worcester's airport is located on the top of one of the city's seven hills and planes to or from New York City or Boston often won't land because of inclement weather. Most Worcesterites don't take the gamble of catching a plane at home; instead, they use Boston's Logan Airport, an hour away.

Maher, who serves as a member of the Massachusetts Port Authority, calls the airport's location "a classical blunder in the city's history." But he doesn't see a new airport, even one between Worcester-Boston or Worcester-Providence, as being in the cards. The reason: pressures from environmentalists and conservationists.

Another problem for Worcester in attracting industry is Massachusetts' well-known and roundly-criticized tax structure, with its property taxes pegged as the second highest in the nation. What to do about it? Some Worcester leaders believe that, combined with property revaluation, it will choke the city and stymie economic growth. Others disagree, pointing to \$500 million of construction for new industry, retail and service outlets in Worcester in the past four years.

"I don't think the tax structure is the deterrent to industry that many people think it is," Singer said. "Industry here has learned to live and grow with it. Outside industry coming here will, too. There are very few states or localities in New England that have a widespread difference in the ultimate tax-bite for corporations."

Some Worcester observers of civic and financial doings also are worried about what they see as a lack of leadership, as the city faces crucial decisions in the years forthcoming.

"There are a lot of people exerting a little pressure in many directions," Singer explained. "In my five years of writing about business and financial matters, I've never seen a truly cooperative effort by industry, business and government. To be sure, things have gotten a little better, however, and now more people seem to be pulling in one direction."

Maher said Worcester's "greatest detriment" is a lack of leadership. "We have had some real civic giants here in the past, but there doesn't seem to be the transition necessary to keep the community vital. That's not to say we don't have men of tremendous talent and potential. We have some leaders

S.N. Behrman told a *New York Times* critic in 1936 that he remembered sitting in his window looking toward the other side of Worcester under the impression that there must be charming and sympathetic people there if only he could meet them. Years later he was to learn that on the other side of Worcester a young man named Robert Benchley was sitting in his window thinking the same thing about Mr. Behrman's side of Worcester.

in their own fields who are developing the capacity for real community leadership."

Maher leaned back in his chair, thought a moment and continued: "I've got to be careful how I say this, but Worcester still suffers too much from its past. We are not as broadminded a city as we should be. We tend to look too much on one's name and background and too little on his education and ability. We deny ourselves a lot of leadership that way."

One decision Worcester must make now is to what extent to implement the Doxiadis consultant's study. Oakes and his Downtown Advisory Committee are taking steps to set up a nonprofit downtown development corporation. Its creation will take an act of the legislature, and the committee hopes to have the legislation filed in time for consideration in the current session. The corporation would be a clearinghouse for planning, with decision-making powers. It would have seed money available to attract other money and to further the development of the downtown area. As planned, it would be a venture of the political, administrative and business leadership of the city.

In an economic nutshell, Worcester is at a crossroads and must make some hard, tough decisions about what kind of city it will be and what quality of life it will provide for its citizenry.

"I don't think there's any question about which way we should be heading," said Stewart F. Oakes, Worcester County National Bank's president. 'If we conceive of ourselves as a regional center, we can plan our destiny and develop our strong assets. If we don't, we will just sit here and finally, over a period of time, be engulfed by the expansion of Boston.'"

Worcester long has suffered from a negative, self-deprecating attitude, a "second-city image," in part because of its proximity to Boston. But there's some evidence that those feelings may be on the wane, that Worcester can be an entity, if not *unto* itself, at least more *for* itself. And an entity with greater pride in itself.

Singer perhaps summed it up best. The *Evening Gazette's* business and financial writer calls himself an outsider, who has lived in Florida, Texas, California and New York, and who has some basis for comparison. "I can remember coming here 15 or 20 years ago and finding Worcester gradually disintegrating. I watched us hit our low period, but now things are beginning to happen. Worcester is on the verge of some tremendous growth. If they put some 'Worcester stock' on the market, I would buy. It's a good investment."



The reflecting pool in the new Worcester Center.