

CHOICES FOR WORCESTER

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What are the alternate paths to Worcester's future?

What scenarios can we envision for the city? A scenario is not a prediction. It is, instead, an alternate path to the future that can be influenced by the choices we make.

I see three alternative paths. The first one is:

The Main Road

This is where the average American city is headed. It's not a pretty picture. If you recently have been to Hartford, New Haven, Springfield or Syracuse you have experienced the phenomena of the declining American city. It is characterized by high dependency on welfare, growing numbers of people who are illiterate and innumerate, failing public education and increasing breakups of families. These cities have declining economies, severe budget problems, and rising conflict over how declining tax revenues are spent. Municipal workers are demoralized. Downtowns are dead or nearly so.

Among these general conditions of deterioration are pockets of vitality and community strengths; solid neighborhoods, prestigious institutions, flourishing professions, private clubs, cultural associations and prosperous businesses.

If you take a frog and drop him into a pot of boiling water he will summon every bit of energy to leap out and escape. If you drop the frog into cold water and then turn up the gas, the water heats up so gradually the frog hardly notices it until he is cooked. By then his muscles have atrophied and he's gone. Unwise political, social, and administrative policies over thirty years are now coming home to roost.

The Main Road cities are struggling for minimal survival with band-aids, funding cutbacks, expedient solutions, and heated demonology between special interest groups. Those who choose to live in a community that provides enrichment, reasonable safety, and aesthetics move on. And, of course, a person's age usually has a strong influence and their mobility and choice.

Many cities have completed extensive downtown development in an attempt to rise above the problems of the Main Road but it hasn't worked. The fundamental problem is not one of physical decay but one of diminished human spirit and apathy.

The second alternative is:

The Low Road

The difference between the Main Road and Low Road is the speed at which deterioration is occurring and the relative balance between "pockets of vitality and community strength" and the forces of decay. While it's a matter of judgment, cities like Newark, Jersey City (NJ), Lawrence (MA), and Gary (IN) are already well down the Low Road. The Main Road eventually becomes the Low Road. The outlook for the Low Road cities is bleak: gang rule, racial warfare, and gradually becoming outcasts from neighboring communities.

The third alternative, as you might expect by now, is:

The High Road

It's easy to describe cities on the Main or Low Road because we have seen them. What characterizes the High Road? Are there models to follow or must we think it through ourselves?

There are, in my estimation, at least five driving forces that determine whether a city gets to travel the High Road. They are:

A growing economy. To fund improvement in our public infrastructures, public education, and other necessary government activities we need a growing economic pie. We need jobs and particularly ones that pay salaries that enable a family to live with dignity. A High Road city must have a love affair with business. An expanding economy can fund the High Road. A declining economy requires splitting a shrinking pie and is always divisive.

Superior education. Troubled cities took over thirty years to get into their current predicaments. Transforming them will not happen in months, a year or five years. It will take a decade to see early results and more to achieve outside recognition. Today's fifth graders will be parents, workers, and voters during some part of the journey. They must be able to read, write, count, think, draw on their values, and compete with a global work force.

Government that works. Career government personnel must be competent at executing basic functions such as public education, public safety, public health and public works. Elected government officials must lead a cooperative effort for the common good over the long term. Most cities have been afflicted with a government driven by short-term (expedient) responses and special interests. The climate for government employees need radical improvement. They are often treated as second-class citizens, managed by the numbers, seldom appreciated and highly criticized. Under those conditions what kind of public services can we expect?

A sense of aesthetics. Taste sets standards that affect spirit and behavior. Parks, streets, buildings, landscaping all set a tone to a city. Minimal taste can be governed by regulation. Good taste is usually adopted voluntarily. Peer pressure can influence the course of good taste. And good taste can become contagious.

Citizens' spirit. Civic spirit can range from a spectrum to distrust to apathy to boosterism to deep-seated commitment to the common good. I don't know any way to stick a thermometer in the city to get a reading. My guess is that the proverbial citizen in the street is somewhere between distrust and apathy. No transformation of a city can take place without the commitment of a large number of citizens.

These are three alternate paths to Worcester's future and five forces that drive a High Road renewal. However, all renewal must be grounded in an accurate view of current reality.

What is Current Reality?

I am not a researcher. So you must understand my analysis is from personal observation, experience and intuition – not researched facts. I acknowledge my generalizations are probably too sweeping.

1. Socioeconomic

Ultimately a community is the sum total of its citizens. All cities have people at the socioeconomic extremes and at various places in the middle. I make no pretension to know the spread here or elsewhere. But like you I have impressions. I also believe a reading of socioeconomic conditions is necessary to engage citizens in the process of renewing a city. It is a guide to public taste, aspirations, and what is “practical and doable.”

I see Worcester’s socioeconomic profile along these lines:

An underclass

A sizeable class who are trying to survive day to day by hook or by crook. They are supplemented by a number of rootless teenagers. It’s a visible group in downtown areas and extends to other parts of the city but I have no idea the proportion to the total population. This group is likely to have no interest in community renewal.

The poor and trying hard

This group devotes all their energies to satisfy the first two steps on Maslow’s Ladder (Food, Shelter and Safety) with not much left for building “a city on the hill.”

The low-income working class

This group ekes out a living but generally has limited education and narrow interests.

The self-sufficient

Individuals who potentially have civic interest but perceive themselves powerless to be an influence on city affairs.

The middle-income class

A large group who are economically sufficient and have a sense of belonging to some constituency in the city. However, they feel disempowered about government and Worcester.

The upper-income

An educated class who are sensitive to and have a stake in the city. They understand what is happening but they can be boiled frogs just like everybody else.

My point in engaging in this exercise of establishing vague socioeconomic categories is to alert us to practicalities. It is the people in the latter three categories that will drive transformation. They have the capacity for self-sufficiency and civic

responsibility. Are there enough of them? Can we talk a common language? What are common interests we have for the city? Can they be engaged in reform?

2. Downtown

Dick Traina's report on Worcester Center is current reality. Worcester's revitalization will not be led by remodeling the Galleria. It's not in the cards. Downtown rebuilding is not the key to the High Road. Downtown development – in small, incremental and tasteful steps – can be a byproduct of making progress on the five previously mentioned driving forces.

3. Pockets of Vitality

There is good news that distinguishes Worcester from the majority of cities heading down the Main Road.

We have pockets of vitality where excellence of some form is pursued and achieved in some degree. Worcester is blessed many times in this regard. Building on these strengths can be the wellspring for our city's renewal. Here are some that come quickly to mind:

- Holy Cross, WPI, and Clark hold high ratings from Barron's. By any reasonable definition, that achievement for each college qualifies for the accolade "excelling." Few cities in the United States have three schools with comparable rank.
- The University of Mass Medical complex is a top-flight teaching hospital, a nationally recognized medical research center and highly respected medical school.
- Worcester's Biotech Park, provide the infrastructure and momentum to be one of the country's centers in this emerging field of technology.
- Worcester, for a city with a population of 160,000, has an impressive array of business activity. Here are but a few examples:

Norton, a Fortune 500 company, dominates the international market for industrial abrasives and is a strong player in the emerging industrial ceramic market.

Insurance companies – State Mutual, Paul Revere and Hanover, operate nationally and annually take in premium over \$5,000,000,000 and manage over \$15,000,000,000 in assets. They employ over 11,000 people nationally (5,200 in the Worcester area).

Wyman Gordon – a major supplier to manufacturers of aircraft is a Fortune 500 company.

- The city's cultural assets include the Worcester Art Museum and the annual musical festival each of which enjoy national distinction in their respective fields.
- Non-profit organizations such as the Worcester Economic Club, Greater Worcester Community Foundation and the Mercy Center all excel in their respective fields.

- Our new magnet schools are exciting steps forward in improving public education.
- Many Main Road cities have downtowns that are cosmetically more attractive but are surrounded by decaying neighborhoods. Worcester's neighborhoods from Shrewsbury Street to the West Side, from Burncoat to Grafton Hill, from Webster Square to Tatnuck, retain their social fiber and are important potential sources of renewal. Recent progress in Main South is impressive.

This list is not intended to be complete but instead to illustrate that Worcester has numerous core strengths upon which to build a thriving city. By and large, these institutions, organizations, companies and neighborhoods are under-appreciated.

Who Are The Players?

Steering a city of Worcester's age, size, and diversity from the Main Road to the High Road is a formidable task. Who are the players? What are their interests?

There is another question that must precede "who are the players." Should we design a "master plan" at the top and then implement it from the "top/down"? I think not. First, we don't know how to design such a master plan (and many cities have spent fortunes with consultants trying to concoct one (and I know none that worked) and second, we have no messiah who will infuse the spirit of the plan into our community.

Let me digress. I am old enough to remember when the federal Government worked, i.e. implemented programs that solved problems. Social Security and Unemployment Insurance, introduced in the thirties, provided a safety net for the disruption of income that has been affordable to society. Federal Housing Administration (FHA) programs have enabled a larger proportion of Americans to own homes than citizens in any other country. After World War II the Marshall Plan guided an unprecedented successful economic reconstruction of Europe. The last Federal program that I recall working was the Federal Highway Program introduced by President Eisenhower in the late fifties. Today, I seldom meet anyone who has any confidence that the Federal government will solve our current problems with drugs, schools, poverty, or homelessness.

If top down government programs have not worked in the past thirty years, have any major societal issues succeeded?

The answer is clearly yes. The nonsmoking movement, civil rights for minorities, economic rights for women, and legal protection for the environment are all significant achievements. Every one of these movements was driven from the bottom up and engaged the minds and spirits of individuals who worked together toward a desired and worthwhile goal.

What is the point of this digression from the issues at hand in Worcester? Master plans, conceived at the top, and implemented from the top down have not generally been effective in improving governance and the delivery of government services over the past three decades. What has worked has had the spirited input and support of a substantial number of citizens. It is interesting that success stories about transformed

inner city schools center on independent principals who engage parents in decisions and activities.

To get on the High Road, I am convinced we must raise the civic aspirations of a large number of Worcester citizens. We must engage their spirit and help them make informed choices. Will it be a lot of work? Yes. Is it impossible? We don't know unless we try. Is there a better alternative? I'm open to it.

Now let's go back to the question, "Who Are The Players?" Obviously, there are many people who influence the viewpoint of citizens. Position in the pecking order is helpful but not an accurate measurement of leadership that begets followership.

Here's a list of the obvious – the Mayor, City Council members, heads of institutions and corporations, upper and middle management staffs of the institutions and corporations, heads of unions, city administrators, clergy, business owners, bar owners, civic club leaders, members of professional firms, the municipal research staff, college faculties and administrative personnel, public school faculty, private school faculty, hospital technical staff, taxi drivers, bus drivers, and just about any group of citizens whose concerns about the city rise beyond personal interest.

I would avoid only one group – the press and media. Why? Discussions about what should constitute the High Road, about the driving forces, about how to achieve them should be conducted directly between people – not through the press. We need an atmosphere of dialogue where mental models can be shaped to put Worcester on the High Road, not a debate for political posturing.

Mental Models

Civic spirit is driven by attitudes. Attitudes, in turn, are determined by a set of concepts, which shape thought and opinion. These concepts are our mental models. Though we are often unaware of them, they are intrinsic to our mental processes. Academics refer to these fundamental concepts as paradigms.

I suggest that moving Worcester from the Main Road to the High Road depends more on replacing Main Road mental models with High Road mental models than on any other factor. Progress depends not just on the intellectual grasp of High Road concepts by a few in influential positions but by general acceptance and voluntary support from many citizens.

Do not confuse leadership with positions in pecking order. There are workers who are more effective in influencing voluntary change than vice presidents. There are teachers who influence how people look at the world more than do some principals and superintendents.

I do not pretend to have a magic list of mental models for Worcester to achieve High Road status. I would be highly suspicious of anyone who made such a claim. Nevertheless, there are a few concepts, which if adopted and practiced, could launch the journey.

- All the city's constituencies must cooperate to expand our economy so that we bring more money into the city, create living wage jobs and increase the tax base to undergird the transformation of Worcester. As I said earlier, there must be a love affair between business and the city. It begins with nourishing the companies we have and must lead to making Worcester the first choice location for business in New England – in spite of the fact we are in Massachusetts. To provide high quality government service, we must be able to pay for it through an expanding tax base; not higher tax rates.
- City employees perform for the city as they are treated by their managers who are proxies for the city. They deserve to be treated as first class citizens. In turn, citizens deserve high productivity and recognizable achievement from city departments. We must replace political interference and the civil service mentality with values that reward performance and pursue “what works best.” Human judgment should override rules when it results in a better outcome for the city. The Top/Down Model no longer works effectively in non-emergency situations. The city's problems are too complex to lend themselves to solutions conceived and ordered by a few people with power. We must disburse power throughout the city organization in a gradual, orderly, and responsible manner.
- There is No Free Lunch. Every political favor to a special interest costs common interests. Constituent service by political officials should be evaluated on a cost benefit basis for all constituencies.
- Changing the direction of American cities is an enormous undertaking. It will be a generation's work and require widespread citizen involvement. The magnitude of the task should not be underestimated nor the stamina needed to see it through. Human ingenuity and sweat will determine which cities achieve the High Road, not political promises to mooch help from higher levels of government which themselves are floundering. We should have a bias toward involving young people for they have the highest stake in the future.

Mental models, such as the ones I suggest, can never be imposed. Instead they form through awareness of frustrating conditions, discussion, experience, reflection, and finally a personal conviction about the idea. The process must lead to voluntary acceptance.

I believe, for instance, that this process about ideas – ideas about freedom, democracy, private property, and free markets – is what has undergirded the changes we have witnessed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

There is no question in my mind that the majority of Worcester's citizens would choose the High Road over the Low Road. The questions at hand are:

What mental models (the concepts that bind us together) will move the city to the High Road?

Should citizens wait for the Messiah to lead us or should each of us dig in and contribute what we can to start a High Road movement?