



The streets of Providence (L) filled with people after business hours last month. Downtown Worcester (R) is fairly deserted on a recent Thursday evening. These scenes capture how the fortunes of Worcester and Providence have diverged in recent years. Globe Photos/ Stew Milne (L); Ed Collier

## Two downtowns on diverging paths Providence sails as Worcester lags

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By Robert Gavin, Globe Staff | June 5, 2005

**WORCESTER** -- On a warm spring day, Richard Kennedy, president of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, walked along a nearly empty street and turned into one of the few restaurants in downtown. The scene: low lights, subdued conversation, and mostly middle-aged men, save for an elderly couple or two.

On another spring day in Providence, developer Arnold "Buff" Chace strode through downtown, passing new restaurants, coffee shops, and specialty stores, on his way to a New York-style bistro facing the Providence River. Here, sunlight brightened the interior, 20- and 30-something professionals crowded tables, conversation buzzed to a low roar.

These contrasting lunchtime scenes capture how the fortunes of Worcester and Providence have diverged in recent years. In 1990, both were struggling with recession, declining manufacturing bases, and fading downtowns. Today, Providence ranks among the nation's hottest mid-sized cities, while Worcester, where the young adult population fell sharply, decidedly does not.

What happened in between illustrates the role downtown plays in defining a city's image and progress. Although downtowns have lost importance as commercial centers, they remain focal points for cities, venues where activities and interests intersect, and ultimately create a sense of place, said John Mullin, director of the Center for Economic Development at the University of Massachusetts.

"I know of no great city," Mullin said, "or even a good one that has a bad downtown."

In many respects, Worcester has done as well or better than Providence in improving schools, supporting neighborhoods, and increasing the number of jobs. But Worcester has yet to find the formula to revive its downtown, while Providence has restored its city center as a place to work, gather, and live.

As a result, Providence has built a reputation as a city on the move, while Worcester is overlooked. The success of downtown Providence has helped place the city on any number of best-cities lists, fostering a sense of cool that attracts young professionals, as well as refugees from Boston and New York seeking urban amenities at lower costs.

Since 1990, Providence's population has increased 10 percent, not only making it one of New England's fastest-growing cities, but surpassing Worcester, to become the region's second most populous city behind Boston.

Perhaps more important, Providence's population of 20- to 34-year-olds remained stable in the 1990s, while Worcester's plunged 13 percent and New England's 20 percent. Economists view this demographic group as important because young adults tend to have the education and updated skills sought by employers and are considered crucial to the knowledge economy.

Two recent corporate decisions also illustrate downtown's impact. GTECH Holdings Corp., an information technology firm specializing in lottery systems, is moving its headquarters from West Greenwich, R.I., to downtown Providence. Among the reasons: Company officials view the cosmopolitan atmosphere of downtown Providence as attractive to customers who visit from around the world.

In contrast, Carlin, Charron, & Rosen LLP, a growing regional accounting firm, moved its headquarters to Westborough from downtown Worcester, where its roots go back more than 80 years. "We wanted more of a regional presence, and Worcester has the connotation of being at the end of the world," Robert Charron, managing partner, explained.

The recent histories of Worcester and Providence are, in many ways, the story of their downtowns. In Providence, downtown became a laboratory for civic engagement, where political and business establishments interacted with university officials and assorted dreamers.

in Worcester, a symbol of divided political leadership, an eroding commercial base, and a community resigned to disappointment.

Certainly, Providence starts with advantages over Worcester. As Rhode Island's capital and biggest city, it not only benefits from the activity generated by state government, but also the political clout that Worcester does not have, as the second city in Massachusetts.

But Providence also made good decisions. For example, it resisted the urban renewal projects of the 1960s and '70s and saved its stately downtown buildings and historic streetscape. Later, it undertook an ambitious project, creatively financed with federal highway funds, to restore the city's paved-over rivers, creating a downtown riverfront park.

These efforts ultimately positioned Providence to prosper as young professionals, empty-nesters, and others headed back to cities. Not only have developers such as Chace invested in transforming downtown, so have colleges and universities, such as Brown, Johnson & Wales, and the Rhode Island School of Design. RISD, for example, has bought at least three buildings and invested some \$70 million to convert them to academic centers and housing, putting hundreds of students downtown.

"In some ways, we were self-centered opportunists," Roger Mandle, RISD president, said. "The more safe, the more beautiful, the more vibrant our city is, the more it helps our competitive edge in recruiting faculty and students."

Worcester, however, like many other cities, bought into urban renewal, wiping out a section of downtown and replacing it with a concrete monolith of a shopping mall. The mall failed, and though later reborn as an outlet center failed again.

Meanwhile, the civic engagement of Providence did not happen in Worcester, according to interviews with city officials, business leaders, and other observers. As traditional industries declined and as corporate mergers snapped up local companies, the old business establishment unraveled. The city's nine colleges and universities -- including Clark University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and the College of the Holy Cross -- remained on the outskirts, focusing community involvement on public schools and immediate neighborhoods.

Clark's president, John Bassett, said that when he came to Worcester five years ago, he was surprised by the separation between the city and its higher education institutions.

"Why hasn't the City of Worcester brought together its colleges and universities?" Bassett said he recalled wondering. "Why haven't we mobilized this expertise?"

Worcester was also hampered by its system of government, which divides power between an elected mayor and appointed manager and too often resulted in disputes, local observers said.

"The question is, who do you go to in Worcester?" said Thomas J. Anton, a Worcester native, Clark University graduate, and Brown University professor. "In the past, the answer has not always been clear, and it makes it much more difficult to get things done."

Anton said the revitalization of Providence benefited from a strong mayor, in whom executive power is concentrated. That system, however, is not without problems: The city's last mayor, Vincent "Buddy" Cianci Jr., is serving a federal prison sentence on corruption charges.

Today in Worcester, new leadership in City Hall, the business community, and universities have helped spark development. Mayor Timothy P. Murray, in his second term, has built a solid working relationship with the manager, Michael V. O'Brien, appointed last year. In turn, they have formed partnerships with the business community and universities.

Together, they are thinking big. Moving forward, for example, is an estimated \$500 million project that would demolish the failed shopping mall, restore the original street pattern downtown, and create an urban village of housing, retail, and offices within walking distance of commuter rail.

Meanwhile, the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences is expanding its downtown campus to add housing for about 200 students, while Worcester Polytechnic Institute and the nonprofit Worcester Business Development Corp. are redeveloping an 11-acre parcel on the edge of downtown, with WPI's Bioengineering Institute as the centerpiece. A hotel is under construction, and a popular local restaurant is moving downtown, undertaking a \$2 million renovation of a historic building.

Mullin, the UMass economic development specialist, said Worcester is making progress in many areas, including fostering a burgeoning biotechnology sector. But "until Worcester comes to grip with its downtown, it is never going to meet its potential," he said.

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Providence has surpassed Worcester in population to become New England's second-biggest city.

<b>Facts</b>	<b>Providence</b>	<b>Worcester</b>
Nicknames	<i>"America's Renaissance City"</i>	<i>"Heart of the Commonwealth"</i>
Population (2003 estimate)	<b>176,365</b>	175,706
Population (1990)	160,728	<b>169,759</b>
Pop. growth (1990-2003)	<b>10%</b>	4%
Median housing price (Metro area)	<b>\$271,200</b>	\$279,300
Colleges and universities	8	<b>9</b>
Famous inventions	70-foot-tall Corliss steam engine	Barbed wire, monkey wrench, smiley face
National lists	"All-America City"	"Best Cities for Singles"
Miles from Boston	50	<b>46</b>
Drive time from Boston (minutes)	56	<b>53</b>
Daily MBTA trains to Boston	<b>12</b>	10
Last MBTA train from Boston (daily)	<b>10:05 p.m.</b>	8:15 p.m.
Unemployment rate (April 2005)	5.8%	<b>5.3%</b>
National League baseball team	Grays (1878-85)	Worcesters (1880-82)
Pennants	2	0
Major highway	I-95	I-290
"Little Dig"	Moving I-95	Route 146 connector

SOURCES: Census; National Association of Realtors; Worcester Historical Society; Baseball-reference.com; MapQuest; MBTA; Central Massachusetts Convention and Visitors Bureau; City of Worcester; City of Providence; Forbes magazine; Mass. Division of Unemployment Assistance; Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training; Worcester Regional Research Bureau; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Worcester Historical Museum.