



A MAYOR A MANAGER A CITY RECLAIMED

WORCESTER MAYOR JOSEPH M. PETTY
WORCESTER CITY MANAGER EDWARD M. AUGUSTUS JR.

Bernard **WHITMORE**

Worcester natives love to tell stories of the city's glory days. This love is matched by something approaching despair, as they long to emulate what they see when they travel to other cities. Compared to Boston, it seems as if there is nothing interesting going on here at home, nothing new to explore, no fun.

Over the years, I've learned how to defend my adoptive town, but my arguments were seldom met with much enthusiasm. Then, recently, something strange happened: While taking a break at work, a colleague launched into the age-old lament about Worcester: "Nothing happens in this dump. There's never any development..."

Astonished, I asked, "Have you driven *anywhere* in Worcester lately? Have you *seen* the changing landscape?"

Then I listed a few of the new building projects and age-old blighted areas changing for the better. At social events, there are new faces and a new sense of energy. I came to realize that there is a new Worcester happening, and it's not taking the form so many past generations envisioned.

Coincidentally, within days of that conversation, I was given the opportunity to discuss this phenomenon with some of our city's leadership. I leapt at the opportunity and found their enthusiasm to be genuine and inspiring.

First, I sat down with Worcester Mayor Joseph M. Petty.

What do you consider the "New Worcester"?

The New Worcester, for me, is a change in perspective. People that live in our city, and those outside our city, like what they see happening and are becoming positive about Worcester. We have momentum which is attracting top talent, businesses and cultural events.

Nationwide, you are seeing a renewed interest from people who want to live in cities. This is not just recent college graduates but young families, seniors who want to downsize and everyone in between. Worcester is a great place to live and to start a family or business. The operating costs are not what they are in other cities. Rent is lower, and the cost of real estate across the board makes it an affordable alternative. The quality of life is excellent, as is the cost of real estate and rentals.

Our relationship as a city with the colleges and universities is better than ever. Their graduates are certainly taking a longer look at Worcester and trying to find a way to make it work here. We are activating the City Hall Common with events that people want to go to; this has helped pull people out of those office buildings and is driving positive activity downtown.

It is about creating the 18-hour city that we are trying to build. Cities as a whole are more attractive to both businesses and residents. Businesses want to be where the action is, and I am certain that is part of the

reason the PawSox are interested in Worcester. I am sure there's some appeal to working in a suburban office park, but the next generation of workers just do not see it that way.

For cities, especially now, that question of identity is incredibly fluid. It is based on history; it is based on the generations of immigrants that came and left and those who stayed. It is based on restaurants and employment. And all of those things change over time. When I grew up in Worcester, I never would have guessed that one day Ghanaian would be widely spoken in our schools.

I think what we are seeing is the growth of community as much as identity. You are seeing the people that are driving the arts community with events like POW! WOW! working shoulder to shoulder with the young people managing the makerspace Technocopia. When I was younger, you would never have seen a muralist and a welder speak the same language; today, that's fairly common.

It is that sort of collaboration and cross-pollination that can create some amazing results. Success breeds success. Five years ago, the idea of daily flights to New York City would have been too much to even dream about. This is coming about after years of work on the part of Congressman McGovern and a city team going back to Tim Murray when he was mayor.

The city has advocated for greater investment in our airport by the state. That has led to over a 10-year, \$85 million investment plan by the state. As these investments are made, it makes it easier for Jet Blue to come in and offer something like daily flights to JFK Airport.

Our business and non-profit communities are absolutely part of moving our city forward. These are the organizations that are funding programs like Recreation Worcester. This is a free, after-school and summer camp program offered to all the children in Worcester. Programs like this keep our students safe, active and healthy and are only possible because of the partnerships with so many organizations and companies. And that sort of program is one small piece of the puzzle, but it is certainly an important one.

What's the nature of the partnership between the mayor and city manager in moving the city forward?

We work closely on many initiatives. While infighting and partisanship might make for good television, it is no way to govern a city. Conflict is for politics. Consensus is for governing. I personally do not want to see the sort of acrimony on exhibit in Washington become normal on a local level.

If you could change one thing in Worcester, what would it be?

First, I would like the PawSox to move here. Second, I wish there was a really dynamite bagel shop here. I mean a bagel shop so good that as people drove past on the Mass Pike, they would say, "You know, Worcester has this amazing bagel shop. We should stop."



**Worcester Mayor
Joseph M. Petty**



After this conversation with Mr. Petty, I sat down with Worcester City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., and posed similar questions.

Is there a "New Worcester"?

People have used the term "renaissance," and that's probably a good way to characterize what's going on in Worcester. Worcester's been reinventing itself from an old, heavy manufacturing economic base that, over the last 25 years or so, has been morphing into more a service economy - "eds and meds," a knowledge-based economy.

It's been a painful process. We lost a lot of the old manufacturing companies. It's created a lot of dislocation, lots of angst and change. But I think we're hitting our stride right now. Quite frankly, I think Worcester has positioned itself to embrace the future partly because of our heavy college presence in the city - the growing biotechnology and life sciences sector.

The other thing about change is it's more than "bricks and mortar"; it's an attitude. By that, I mean people's feelings of, "Oh, it can't happen here. ... It won't work here."

I think we're shedding that self-loathing. We're starting to say, "Why not us? Why not Worcester?" I think that once you start making that shift in thinking, actions and results start translating:

- The city is getting younger. If you look at the numbers, we're retaining a lot more of the college grads than we had previously; some of the younger people that might have gone away to school are coming back to the city.
- We're finally embracing our identity as a college town. For a long time, we had a love-hate relationship with the colleges. Our situation is a little unique in that the geographic location of the college campuses allowed them to be islands. In Worcester, if you came to the downtown, you wouldn't have seen them - until the past five or 10 years with the Mass College of Pharmacy, Quinsigamond College and Becker. Now, you're seeing it in the downtown more than before.
- Three-and-a-half years ago, before I became manager, we didn't have food trucks in Worcester. We had ordinances that basically banned them because they'd compete with restaurants. Then we said, "Let's revisit that; we can have both." Since then, we've had an explosion of restaurants and food trucks.
- We've had two back-to-back, very successful POW! WOW! mural festivals. We're now integrating public art into some of our capital projects. I think the mayor has been a big leader in terms of embracing diversity within the community, particularly the immigrant community.
- Another example is what we've just done with the bikes - the bicycle-share program. You see the new yellow bikes all over the city.

Taken together, all of those things tend to create an atmosphere, a culture in the city that attracts people. There are food trucks, places to hang out, events to go to, public art that's engaging! It's the big projects, but it is also the little things that have added up to create a culture that makes Worcester feel different than it was.

Downtown has been a block-by-block, building-by-building battle that's all about *density*. We're trying to create *density*. When you achieve density, the market reacts; people say, "There's 2,000-3,000 people living downtown that weren't living there before; they're paying \$2,000-plus a month for rent. These people have money! I want to put a restaurant here or a coffee shop over there or retail."

We're trying to embrace market forces instead of working against them.

As part of that, we've challenged ourselves as a city to fan these embers of growth by trying to do infrastructure changes in a way that encourages walkability, a more interesting and engaging streetscape, to get rid of these blocks of dead buildings where there's blank facades and covered up windows.

That's not only aesthetic, it's also about *safety*. If you're walking down a street and you see people eating in a restaurant or you see people in an outside café, it gives you a sense of safety and security. You're not there by yourself. It's part of a thoughtful strategy that's worked in other cities.

[Regarding identity] I think what we're trying to be is *authentic* and not put labels such as "Paris of the '80s" or "Austin of the '90s" on ourselves any more.

A lot of the development, like the Canal District, is organic. It didn't come handed down from City Hall. It's *real*; it embraces some of the old mill history of Worcester and has reclaimed those buildings and turned them into funky spaces for living, shopping and entertainment.

I think we've learned the lesson of *not* forcing something.

What matters is what works. Everything else is ephemeral.



Worcester City Manager
Edward M. Augustus Jr.

Tell me about your relationship with the mayor.

My friendship with Joe Petty goes back 35 years or so. We grew up in essentially the same neighborhood - the Webster Square area. Not many people know this: There was a softball team at Our Lady of the Angels; he was the coach and I was the star player [considerable laughter followed by light-hearted regrets at the boast].

We've stayed friendly and known each other over the years, shared a lot of common friends and then, for the last 3½ years, you couldn't ask for a better partner than Joe, working with me as the mayor and chair of the city council, trying to move the agenda forward.

We don't worry about who's getting the credit; we figure if you do the right thing, there's plenty of credit for everybody. It's about always working together, checking in with each other, making sure we're working in concert with each other.

In past Worcester history, that wasn't always the case. A lot of energy can be lost when you're trying to outdo each other. We have total trust. I have never thought twice about whether Joe Petty was on my side, and hopefully he feels the same.

If you could change one thing in Worcester, what would it be?

The attitude.

By that I mean the attitude of, "Oh, it won't work here!" The negative, self-fulfilling prophesy of "we can't do it." I think it is changing, but I'd like it to change quicker and to be more universal.

Let's suspend disbelief! Just for once! Just for a little bit and see what it feels like! And see what can come when you don't immediately approach an issue or a project by figuring out every little thing that could go wrong with it.

If you think about it, your whole approach changes; your energy changes when you approach challenges in a positive way!