

# **Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA)**

## **Worcester making the environment a planning priority**

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COLUMN: POLITICS AND THE CITY

Worcester is quietly developing a reputation for being a "green" community. It has nothing to do with the number of people of Irish ancestry living in Worcester; rather, it's in reference to the number of environmentally friendly policies that have been adopted and implemented by the city government.

The city's record of the past 15 years is indeed worth noting.

The very successful residential recycling program, which began in the early 1990s, has received much acclaim and has been used as a model by municipalities across the country.

Great strides have been made in increasing the amount of conservation and open space land in the city.

In 1997, the city had preserved more than 400 acres, but through land acquisitions or conservation restrictions obtained from land owners, another 440 acres of undeveloped land has been added to its open space

inventory just in the past two years. That land is now used for conservation and passive recreation, as well as for enhancing the protection of watershed areas near the city's reservoirs.

District 1 City Councilor Thomas P. White said what has happened in Worcester is unprecedented for an urban center its size.

"Worcester has to rank at the top among cities its size when it comes to preserving open space," Mr. White recently said. "These type of land acquisitions are so significant in this day and age because the pressure to develop any of the remaining open land in Central Massachusetts is incredible. This city has created something that can be enjoyed by generations to come."

- Four years ago, the City Council adopted an ordinance prohibiting the sale and manufacture of mercury fever thermometers in Worcester, as well as prohibiting their import unless a physician determines they are medically necessary.

The intent of the ordinance, officials have said, is to remove products that contain mercury from the city's solid-waste stream.

Mercury is a toxic pollutant that accumulates in the environment and food chain. The incineration of medical and municipal waste that contains whole or broken thermometers is a major source of mercury deposits in the atmosphere in the Northeast, resulting in contamination of air and water.

- When the \$563 million CitySquare redevelopment was being reviewed by the City Council, city councilors

encouraged the use of "green build" principles in the project's design.

Green build is one of the latest trends in the construction industry, employing techniques that improve energy, water and resource efficiency. Green build designers generally minimize the footprints of their developments, allowing more open space, and they use more windows in their structures to maximize natural lighting

and cross ventilation.

- Earlier this year, Worcester became the first city in the state to set a goal of using renewable energy sources to meet 20 percent of its municipal electricity needs by 2010.

The City Council unanimously adopted the "20 Percent by 2010 **Clean Energy** Resolution," which calls for greater use of electricity generated from clean sources of power, such as wind, water and the sun, instead of electricity generated from coal, oil, natural gas and nuclear power.

- The council last week showed it is committed to pursuing that goal when it authorized the city administration to apply for an \$11,837 grant under the **Clean Energy** Choice matching grant program, so the city can hire a part-time energy coordinator. That person would be responsible for analyzing potential costs and economic benefits of incorporating green/**clean energy** technologies in new building and construction designs, as well as capital rehabilitation projects.

City Manager Michael V. O'Brien said he wants to identify alternative energy technologies that will reduce city costs in

its new and existing buildings, and other energy conservation programs.

The grant being sought by the city comes from a program administered by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

For every dollar Massachusetts Electric Co. customers in Worcester spend on so-called **clean energy** - electricity purchased from renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar - the collaborative puts up to \$1 into a community fund, which is then available for the city to spend on projects that promote renewable energy.

The manager intends to name an ad hoc committee, made up of individuals with a wide range of expertise and knowledge, to help the city make decisions on how to spend its renewable energy funds.

"It is critical for the city to identify these new clean and green energy technologies so we can reduce Worcester's demand on fossil fuel energy consumption," Mr. O'Brien said.

Peggy Middaugh, executive director of the Regional Environmental Council, said her group is pleased with the city's efforts to pursue clean, renewable energy options that will provide for a healthier environment and save the city money.

"Worcester has been in the forefront of progressive energy policy," she said. "Now is the time to follow up on those decisions."

To have a well-known respected local environmentalist, such as Ms. Middaugh, praise the city for being in the forefront of progressive energy policy is really something.

After all, Worcester had long been known as a gritty industrial/manufacturing center where environmentalism was seldom, if ever, on the radar screen of many city officials.

But city officials have become much more environmentally aware and sensitive during the past 15 years, as evidence by their willingness to work with such groups as the Regional Environmental Council, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light and Clean Water Action on various municipal issues and pushing the city's "green agenda" forward.

That was underscored a couple of months ago when Mayor Timothy P. Murray was accompanied to Boston by a contingent of local environmental leaders to look at renewable energy sources used by Local 103, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, at its training facility.

The mayor said the local group wanted to see firsthand ways in which the city could use renewable energy sources, especially for some of its larger public projects, such as the new vocational school now under construction and the North High replacement school to be constructed.

With the skyrocketing cost of fuel oil and electricity, he said, it is in the city's best interest to take a good hard look at using renewable energy sources, such as power from solar panels and windmills.

"This city has developed a strong environmental record, but we can't stop there," Mr. Murray said. "We need to do more, and we will."

It's enough to make many other cities green with envy.