

There's more to PILOT than money

By Donald N.S. Unger

Before the building that sported it burned down, a prominent sign, visible from I-290, boasted that Worcester was the home of 10 colleges and universities. Before it lost passenger service (again) our local airport had a banner in it which boosted this claim to 12 — including the geographically dubious assertion that Fitchburg State was one of them. But aside from occasional, fumbling attempts to make these institutions part of the city's re-imaging plans, the fact is that, gut level, Worcester doesn't really have much use for higher education.

That's what the ongoing wrangling about wringing tax revenue from the schools, by whatever name, is really about. And, rather than trying, in petty and short-sighted ways, to nickel and dime the colleges and universities, the city would do better to truly embrace them. They are the only industry left standing around here, and a more constructive town/gown relationship is one of the few paths we have toward real, sustainable redevelopment.

I write this — I should say, as a matter of full disclosure — as someone with a direct stake in this matter: my wife is a tenured professor at one of the local institutions; I also teach locally, on an occasional basis. But my larger interest is really as a homeowner. What's good for the city is good for me. And the colleges and universities are good for the city.

You wouldn't know that from reading the inflammatory rhetoric that has characterized the debate over tax exemptions in recent years. If this is not about the city's disdain for the academic institutions it hosts, where is the parallel debate about revoking the tax exemptions of churches and hospitals? I haven't heard it: Religion and medicine remain sacrosanct. But pointy-headed intellectuals — and their drunken students — are always fair game.

Some have defended the local schools by citing the charitable contributions they make to the city and to other local institutions, some in cash, some in services, some via the charitable work of both students and faculty. But this misses the larger point: jobs.

The schools employ thousands of local people, and professors are just the tip of the iceberg. The bulk of these jobs are in the infrastructure the schools use to maintain both their physical facilities and to provide for the comprehensive needs of their students, everything from food-service workers to librarians to tradespeople of all stripes. The money that students inject into the local economy, moreover, also helps create and maintain jobs in the private sector.

Add to this the fact that the schools have proven themselves to be one of the few resilient sources of economic energy the city can rely on. How do people justify the tax give-backs to The Mall That Ate The Downtown — even if we might, with only slight sarcasm, refer to it as a

non-profit endeavor — while constantly sniping at the schools? Stores and factories, as we have seen, come and go. Their loyalty is to the market and to the lowest bidder. Schools stay.

We should be happy about that; we should be working toward making this a better place for schools, encouraging them to expand here rather than making a hostile environment even more unwelcoming. The UMass Medical School is the linchpin to any chance we have of building a biotech industry here; Clark University has been one of the strongest forces for positive change in Main South; WPI — as was pointed out recently in these pages — has considerable positive weight to throw around, in cash and in kind, in anchoring new development.

None of this should be construed to mean that colleges and universities, and their students, don't have civic obligations: students should be respectful of their neighbors; the schools should be respectful of their neighborhoods. Both should be mindful of the legitimate concerns people have about the impact that large institutions can have on their surroundings. But holding the schools up for money is the wrong way to go. It's not fair to the schools; it's not the smart way to go for the city, either. □

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