

Robert Farrant, *Lowell Sun*, September 2007

Right around Lowell Folk Festival time a reporter for the *Boston Globe* asked whether I'd answer some questions about Lowell's past and present economic development efforts. I'd like to think that this call was prompted by the fact that the *Boston Globe* assigns its reporters my monthly *Sunday Sun* columns as a way to keep up with things outside the big city! Humor me please.

The resulting article titled 'What Renaissance' appeared Sunday, September 9, just a few days after City Manager Lynch announced the selection of a developer for the Hamilton Canal District. Though I was not the only person who commented on the City's efforts, I received calls and emails about the article, some of them quite angry. Many people felt that the piece was none to flattering about our fair city and that the outsiders and me, the 'blow-in' insider, missed the 'there's a lot to like about Lowell' vibe going around.

I said what I thought; I do have that problem sometimes. Among other things, people wondered what I meant when I said: "Many people are beginning to worry and talk about the two Lowells—the one of the interesting cultural revival and the one of these immigrant neighborhoods that are not necessarily connected to renaissance Lowell. You've got this juxtaposition that not everyone involved in the revival wants to talk about."

So, let me try here to clarify what I was saying. I have no doubt that the converted mill spaces were a successful development strategy and that the red brick monuments to the nation's industrial past were never going to see thousands of blue-collar jobs in them again. However, if you check out the Wannalancit Mill building it does contain numerous start-up high tech, biotech, software and other research firms that employ hundreds of people. This is a good thing, for you see the City badly needs better paying jobs.

I know that Lowell is part of a regional economy; many *Globe* readers reminded me of this. I am an historian after all; so, I do have that story line down pretty well. But, because this is true, does it automatically follow that we throw up our hands and mutter 'Oh well, job creation is nearly impossibly so why bother?' I hope not.

My point was not to denigrate what's taken place over the last twenty-five years, but to suggest that we can do more. I wanted readers to consider that the 'condo thing' and the extraordinarily successful arts and culture efforts are not enough for a city this size if we want to help 'lift all boats' and create economic opportunities for the far too many residents that face grinding poverty and the threat of homelessness every day.

Look, I love the Spinners and UMass Lowell hockey and go to every game I possibly can. But, the City's future requires that the energy and passion focused on arts and entertainment—that made 'elephants weep' last April, Lucy Larcom Park come alive all summer with community art, and *On the Road* spring to life at Olive That and More in September—needs to be summoned up to focus on job creation. Lowell needs a dynamic umbrella organization—one modeled after the Cultural Organization of Lowell—dedicated to developing strategies to grow good jobs here and in the several other old mill cities and towns that dot the Merrimack River valley.

## **A Brief History Lesson**

A good deal of the region's employment difficulties can be traced to manufacturing job loss. High rates of unemployment and a too slow recovery from the recent recession demonstrate how dependent the region was upon the success of fickle high tech industry segments. The concentration of those industries along Interstates 495, 93 and 95, coupled with the growth of outsourcing and high tech contract manufacturing outside of the Commonwealth, made the region particularly susceptible to economic suffering after the telecommunications equipment and software busts. This is why I worry about our over-emphasis right now on just one new industry, nanotechnology, to solve all of our employment-related issues.

According to Dr. Edward March of UMass Lowell's Center for Industrial Competitiveness, and formerly a top executive at Lucent Technologies in North Andover, "We are not seeing the thousands of jobs that were once available. If I am a telecom equipment manufacturer, after I build the prototypes I can send the volume production off to China." Many newly arrived immigrants came here on the back end of what was once great job growth. They arrived just as jobs departed, in many cases to the very regions of the world they had just left!

Spin-off firms from UMass Lowell research are engaged in significant new product development in medical and energy areas. For example, Konarka Technologies produces lightweight, low-cost solar fabric, based on an idea that came from University research. The firm has secured venture capital and other funding. University researchers are engaged in numerous health-related projects that may fuel further nanotech and biotechnology employment growth. However, even this good news is tempered by the fact that Boston-area venture capitalists continue to place a substantial portion of their bets on start-ups outside of Massachusetts, while other states are spending far more money to support research at their public universities!

## **What's the Answer?**

I live and work in Lowell and go to galleries and cultural events. I sit on the board of one of the city's museums and am on the City's task force to fight homelessness. I encourage my students to go downtown to events whenever they can. I get it that the ballpark and arena were never intended to be job creation engines. And, I get it that the jobs issues is not Lowell's alone.

We call ourselves an immigrant city and celebrate this history as a touchstone for tourism, folk festivals, and ethnic festivals in the summer; that's terrific. But, festivals alone cannot erase our protracted poverty problem and lack of employment opportunities. Nor can festivals or the ball field produce the badly needed employment we need to sustain working families in Lowell and the Merrimack River Valley.

So, what do we do? Here's a modest start. The City's leaders galvanize residents and take the lead in lots of regional efforts, why not this one? Together, the City, Middlesex Community College (MCC), and my employer, UMass Lowell, can provide leadership to an effort to consider where the next generation of Lowell children will find jobs.

MCC is firmly planted downtown and its actions demonstrate how the presence of students and a committed institution can help in Lowell's downtown transformation process. The City Manager established a remarkably diverse and hard working commission to take on the homelessness challenge. Why not a similar commission on where good jobs will come from? UMass Lowell is considering the construction of a nanotechnology center and other new classroom space. Why not do some of this downtown and at the same time have the School of Management offer business and technical assistance workshops to the hundreds of small businesses scattered in every city neighborhood?

This needs to happen so that families who've lived here for generations can afford to continue to live here, not lose their homes, and not see their college-educated children run away like jobs did to the south and southwest. This must also happen so that newcomers have a shot at the so-called 'American Dream'. Foreclosures are at record highs and the region is losing its college-educated young people at dangerously high numbers. Wishing this away will not stop these trends.

Increased investments in the region's skill base through k-12 and higher education funding will provide area high tech industries with the workforce that they need to be competitive in the global market. At the same time, continued support for the region's numerous arts and culture efforts is an essential part of a larger effort to diversify the regional economy and take full advantage of the area's rich and growing creative economy.

I hope the *Globe* article stimulated people who care about Lowell (I am one of them) to voice their opinions on this issue, one that I believe is central to the city's and the region's future. This topic ought to be part of the City Council election debate. Candidates need to be asked about their ideas for employment creation and what they would do if they were elected to encourage City government, MCC, and UMass Lowell to establish a 'Lowell Works 2010 Task Force' to produce a plan similar to the City's very good 'On the Cultural Road' creative economy plan. 'More jobs' should be on a least one person's campaign sign.

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