Providence officials reject critic's charges of city filth

By BOB WYSS
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Just how dirty is downtown Providence?

Chester Smolski, the director of urban studies at Rhode Island College, thinks it's quite filthy.

Smolski, in a column in Friday's Evening Bulletin, wrote that he has visited 20 cities in the southeastern United States in the last six months and that Providence is dirtier than any of them.

Not surprisingly, not everyone here agrees.

A number of city and civic officials have quizzed this weekend about Smolski's statements. The results:

• Both the city director of public works and Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr.'s top aide were not impressed. Ronald H. Glantz, the mayor's aide, said such comparisons are unfair. It would be, he said, like comparing Providence's water system, which is considered among the best in the country, with another community's water.

• "Would you rather drink the water in Providence or in Biloxi, Miss.?” he asked.

• Erskine N. White Jr., president of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, said he believes litter is a serious problem. However, he's not convinced that Providence is in worse shape than other cities. How do you solve a litter problem? "I wish I knew,” he replied.

• Several other officials all agreed that downtown is dirty, but they suggested that keeping it clean is not a simple task.

“Rhode Islanders are basically slobs,” one city official, who requested anonymity, said. "The best place to see that is downtown Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau, said visitors considering bringing a convention here have pointedly asked him why the city is so dirty.

There are no simple answers. But Puglia says he sees that downtown Providence is changing, and that when they bring their convention here in one, two, or three years, the odds are that the city will have tackled the problem successfully.

"Providence took a long time coming to be dirty,” he said. "I don’t think it is that dirty. I just think certain sections of the city are dirty.

"I see it, everyone else does, too,” he added. "We all talk about it. I think eventually people will tackle it.”

Ron Marsella, whose organization, the Providence Foundation, is affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce, agrees — to a point.

"IT IS OBVIOUS that we have problems,” Marsella said, "but a comparison to any 20 other cities is simplistic.”

Marsella, whose foundation is committed to a revitalization of downtown, said he is completing a three-year study that concludes that a special public-private partnership to manage the downtown will do much to alleviate the problem.

Smolski, in his article, concurs.

Marsella said the team would be managed by a coalition of government and business officials, who would be responsible for downtown maintenance, services and special promotions.
**Officials dispute urban expert’s report that downtown Providence area is filthy**

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A number of city and civic officials were quoted this weekend about Smolski’s statements. The results:

- The city director of public works and Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr.’s top aide were not impressed. Ronald H. Glantz, the mayor’s aide, said such comparisons are unfair. It would be, he said, like comparing Providence’s water system, which is considered among the best in the country, with another community’s water.

  “Would you rather drink the water in Providence or in Biloixi, Miss.?” he asked.

- Erskine N. White Jr., president of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, said he believes litter is a serious problem. However, he is not convinced that Providence is worse than other cities.


- Several other officials agreed that downtown is dirty, but they suggested that keeping it clean is not a simple task.

  “Rhode Islanders are basically slobs,” one city official, who requested anonymity, said. “The best place to see that is down by the Brown Brothers Diner any night. People come out of there during the summer and throw things down on the ground, when there are plenty of trash barrels around.”

Smolski’s assessment nearly was as harsh.

**SMOLSKI FOUND** that the city has more filled-to-overflowing dirty and destitute hives downtown, more unwashed building entrances and more rubbish-filled planters than other communities.

- Daniel E. Healy, public works director, conceded that downtown might be dirty, but said it is only because of construction in progress. It is difficult to maintain streets that are under repair, he said.

Smolski, however, wrote that “downtown was dirty before the construction” and shows little promise that it will not be dirty once the construction is completed.

“Tackles the problem of downtown Providence is changing...”

- GLANTZ MAINTAINED that neither Smolski nor the Providence Journal is doing the city or downtown a favor by writing and publishing negative stories about how dirty things are.

  “It’s very easy to take a city and knock it, rather than to look at it objectively,” he said. “There is a lot of things you can say about Providence, compared to other cities in this country. You have to look at things as a whole.”

Fred Puglia, executive director of the Greater Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau, said visitors considering bringing a convention here pointedly have asked him why the city is so dirty.

There are no simple answers. But Puglia says he tells them that downtown Providence is changing, and that when they bring their convention here in one, two, or three years, the odds are that the city will have tackled the problem successfully.

“Providence took a long time coming to be dirty,” he said. “I don’t think it is that dirty. I just think certain sections of the city are dirty.”

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Smolski, in his article, agreed.

Marsella said the team would be managed by a coalition of government and business officials who would be responsible for downtown maintenance, services and special promotions. The people who would benefit the most, the downtown property owners, would finance the venture, Marsella said.