

## Putting our best foot forward

**Colin Read: Everybody's Business**

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— What makes us unique?

Newcomers and old timers alike cherish the juxtaposition of majestic mountains and an (almost) Great Lake. Is that what defines us?

After all, most towns on the West Coast also have mountains and water. Much of Utah, Idaho, Colorado and Hawaii can make that claim as well. What is our magnet that will attract people to our region?

It is an unfortunate reality that our children are attracted to the bright lights of the big city. Few of our high-school students will attend SUNY Plattsburgh or Clinton Community College. Most will go elsewhere, and only a handful will return.

Our lifeblood is to maintain our towns and cities so that they become jewels in the eyes of those who will return, and attract newcomers or entice those just passing through to stay for a while longer. And mountains and water are not enough. Even if we shine in our own eyes, what must we do to be attractive to others?

We must first move beyond the tyranny of low expectations. Those who succeed do not settle for what has been done before, or aim for the mere good enough. Today to merely maintain is to fall back.

Though there is much to be done, we are currently engaged in some exciting and innovative undertakings.

For instance, a dedicated committee has been working tirelessly to turn a neglected river into a regional treasure. They have secured the funding and completed the engineering necessary to connect the Town of Plattsburgh, SUNY Plattsburgh and the downtown area of the city by way of a river walk. Perhaps in a year we will be able to walk or bicycle for miles along the Saranac River. One may soon be able to walk from a beautiful world-class airport along a majestic and historic river right to our downtown. What other town can make that claim?

And we have an Old Base that has at times served the Navy, the Coast Guard, the Army and the Air Force. It once competed with West Point to become the education center for our military elite. And it was within earshot of the cannons that defined the War of 1812.

On the north side, we have a new, state-of-the-art theater that will be the hub for a new retail development. And it is being done with the class that befits this world-class region. Someday, the north end of town may be able to cater to our entertainment, shopping and recreation needs, and the needs of our neighbors to the north.

Even our former airport will likely emerge as a prize for our community. There is no other area that boasts a square mile of prime real estate, adjoins the river, has wondrous views of the mountains, and is so near to the Northway and the downtown. We can view this, too, as a community treasure, a commons that brings us all

together.

One cannot walk through our older districts for more than five minutes without passing a number of historic buildings, sites of incredible significance, and some amazing architecture. We have a downtown, with old and historic buildings that could tell amazing stories if only they could talk. People like Nancy Monette are listening, and are working hard to mobilize others who can see the beauty a bit of polishing and elbow grease can bring forth.

Other communities celebrate, at every turn, assets much less incredible than ours. Perhaps such communities have excessive pride. Which is the greater sin — excessive pride or insufficient appreciation?

There is a Portuguese saying — Our saints perform no miracles. The saying suggests that we sometimes cannot see miracles right in front of us because we take our local assets for granted.

We have an historic college with some beautiful buildings. And we have a community college that may well be the most beautiful community college in the country. Yet, our students look elsewhere, as we expect little from these treasures. Towns like Geneseo cherish their SUNY colleges, and the colleges live up to their high expectations by providing the lifeblood of their communities. The immense talent of public servants in our institutions can invigorate our community, not merely inhabit it. These are our assets if for no other reason than they are in our city.

We have not appreciated our shoreline, perhaps because we have so much of it. We have a MacDonald's restaurant on prime shoreline in the City of Plattsburgh, and other shoreline is used for commercial buildings, fuel-storage tanks and transient housing. We even had a meth lab on our shoreline, and a railroad track cuts us off from the jewel of Lake Champlain.

Our sewage-treatment plant also cuts off our shoreline and scares away developers who see the beauty of our downtown, but for the effluent plant. Yes, we have a lot invested in our plant. That investment is actually beside the point. We can produce a better state-of-the-art plant that works in symbiosis with nearby wetlands, perhaps adjacent to the Northway, beyond the G.P. plant.

If we do so, we will actually have cleaner sewage treatment in a plant that will have a longer lifetime. There are much more valuable uses for the land freed up. And the additional value to downtown shoreline real estate will more than justify the cost of a new plant. Just because we have invested heavily in an inopportune plant does not mean we cannot do better. Our past investments are water under the bridge, not an excuse to stop dreaming.

Of course, to dream requires us to move beyond the legacies and to work toward the possibilities.

Is all this worth it? After all, it is easy to sit back and accept the status quo. It is much harder to create value and then to beam with pride. This may be hard work. But, has anything of true value come easily?

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