

Hartford's Bad Rep Is Bad Rap

It was the Thursday night before Christmas. I had just finished having dinner at the Hartford Club and stopped in Koji, Hartford's new Yakitori Saki bar, for a drink before heading home. As I was ordering a drink I began to overhear a young man telling two young ladies how dangerous Hartford is. He continued to say that "Frog Hollow, a neighborhood just a few blocks from here, is consumed with drug dealing and shootings."

I have lived in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood for more than five years; for the past two years I have owned my own townhouse in Putnam Heights. Not a week goes by that I don't hear, or overhear, negative comments or sensationalized news stories about Hartford. I also hear people putting down Hartford for being boring and offering nothing to do.

Most of these comments come from people who don't live in, or seriously visit, the city. So let me set the record straight. In the five years I have lived in Frog Hollow, I have never been assaulted, never had my house or car broken into, never heard a gunshot. I do not live in fear.

My daily life is not much different from that of someone living in the suburbs. I own a home, have a job and go to work each day. I shop for groceries at Stop & Shop on New Park Avenue or Jordan Lane in Wethersfield. I cut my lawn in the summer, rake leaves in the fall and shovel snow in the winter. I ride my bicycle all over the city and suburbs in the good weather.

Maybe the only difference is that in the past year I've been to dozens of plays, concerts, hockey and basketball games and receptions, and never had to fight traffic.

Frog Hollow was ravaged by drugs and gang violence in the early 1990s, leaving an impression of the neighborhood that has been slow to change. But since then, much has changed. The gangs are gone and crime is decreasing. There is still some drug dealing in the neighborhood, but it is nothing like it once was. The biggest problem we have is absentee landlords who don't adequately maintain their properties or screen their tenants.

Investments by nonprofits, the city, the state and private developers have created more new housing units over the past four years in this neighborhood than in most suburban towns over the same period. The Mortson Street/Putnam Heights redevelopment, where I live, is a good example of investment and change in North Frog Hollow.

After years of disinvestment, arson and other problems, these two streets of three-story, "perfect six" apartment buildings were renovated or rebuilt into two-unit, owner-occupied townhouses. The project attracted both city and suburban residents to this distressed neighborhood.

The two streets, with 60 units, are now occupied by households of many ethnic backgrounds and differing levels of income. The neighborhood is greatly improved but not perfect; we struggle with some quality-of-life issues, such as litter, noise, loitering and those pocket bikes.

The important thing is that we are building on the improvements. Newly renovated housing on Park Terrace, coming projects on Zion Street and in the former Hartford Office Supply building on Capitol Avenue, streetscape and utility improvements on Park Street, the ongoing restoration of Pope Park and the remarkable renovation of the Cathedral Lyceum funded by the Melville Charitable Trust are just some of the projects making Frog Hollow stronger once again.

Yes, Hartford has problems. Although overall crime is down, there is still some violent crime, most of it localized, that must be stamped out. But this doesn't mean Hartford is a dangerous and bad place, and doesn't cancel out the positive assets the city has to offer.

So let's get the story straight. It's not nearly as bad as you may have heard.

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