

Our View

Willimantic is the real award winner

No community ever wants to be labeled “on the decline.”

It means a city or municipality once had a period of socioeconomic prosperity but, for whatever reason, is no longer enjoying the fruits of a community's labor like it has before.

Think modern-day Detroit compared to prior generations.

Willimantic, in recent decades, has had its shares of ups and downs.

It has endured negative reputations and fair and unfair stereotypes.

The same community in Windham County has been labeled as being “Romantic” as well as “Heroin Town.”

These days, however, it is carrying a new label that we hope continues and one that cannot be just be assumed.

It appears Willimantic is “on the rise.”

Those were the words of Christine Schilke, who is the marketing director of the Connecticut Main Street Center, a statewide group that promotes revitalized Main Streets.

On June 3, Willimantic hosted the CMSC for its 2019 Vibrant Main Street Awards of Excellence program.

The event took place at the Arts at the Capitol Theater magnet high school on Main Street in Willimantic, with several towns honored for progress forward on their respective downtowns.

The only town in the area to receive an honor that night was Hebron, a well-deserved award showing progress as the rural bedroom community continues to evolve into a pedestrian-friendly place.

But perhaps the biggest local community to win was the host community itself — Windham/Willimantic.

After all, Schilke said the CMSC doesn't just allow any community to host its awards gala.

“We like to ask, ‘Who has a good story to tell that hasn't been told yet?’” Schilke said. “We know that Willimantic is on the rise and has had a lot of really positive momentum, so we thought this was a good year to showcase that.”

You heard that correctly.

In the eyes of a major organization committed to promoting downtowns, Willimantic is “on the rise.”

That's nothing to sneeze at.

But it's also nothing Windham officials can rest their laurels on.

While there has been much work done, there is still much work to do.

There's a massive, multimillion dollar rehab and construction project to bring housing and commercial development to the Hale and Hooker areas downtown.

There's an apartment/commercial development plan out there for the Windham Mills building.

There's a downtown whitewater park, which was a beneficiary of the awards program, expected to open off Bridge Street on the banks of the Willimantic River.

Yes, there's a lot going on.

But there are some hurdles.

There are still empty storefronts and buildings that need to be occupied.

And the old Path Academy building downtown is about to be empty as EastConn aims to open a regional alternative high school elsewhere in town. That will need to be addressed.

Sometimes, the local commercial development game is more like a game of “Whack-a-Mole” as one building is filled as others become empty.

It shows there is no time to rest when economic development is the goal.

Thankfully, Willimantic has a bit of momentum. It is, after all, “on the rise.”



Christine Schilke of the Connecticut Main Street Center speaks during the 2019 Vibrant Main Street Awards ceremony recently at the Arts at the Capitol Theater in Willimantic recently. File photo