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INTRODUCTION TO COMPREHENSIVE SANITARY SURVEY OF WOONSOCKET, RHODE ISLAND

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THE City of Woonsocket is highly typical of many other New England communities, particularly those in which the basic industry is textile in character or those in which the economy is dependent upon one type of industry. Similarities in geography, topography, history, economy and the like are all matters with which I am certain this audience is familiar. Accordingly, no purpose would be served by discussing them in detail at this time. Rather, this portion of the presentation will be restricted to such introductory material as is considered essential to an understanding of the technical data to be presented immediately following.

Woonsocket is the fourth largest municipality in Rhode Island. It is located in the extreme northeastern section of the State, its northern boundary being the Massachusetts-Rhode Island line. The City is approximately 8.8 square miles in area and has a population slightly in excess of 50,000. It is bisected by the Blackstone River which, together with several tributary streams, drains the entire community.

Historical documents indicate that a settlement existed at the present site in 1700 if not somewhat earlier. However, its incorporation as a town did not occur until 1867 at which time that portion of the City which presently lies easterly of the Blackstone River was "set off" from the Town of Cumberland. The portion westerly of the river was acquired from the Town of Smithfield in 1871. Status as a city was attained in 1888.

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Industrial and commercial enterprise appear to have commenced in 1712 with the establishment of a corn and fulling mill. Between then and 1720, a forge was constructed followed by a scythe factory. The first cotton mill was erected about 1822 and another in 1827. The manufacture of woolen goods was begun in 1831 by Edward Harris whose name subsequently became prominent throughout the United States.

It is certain that these interests as well as the community in general derived impetus and benefit from the Blackstone Canal between Providence and Worcester which was opened in 1828. However, chief growth and accelerated prosperity occurred with the advent of the Providence and Worcester Railroad which began operating in 1847. With the exception of fluctuations common to the area or the nation, development continued at a favorable rate until 1929 when the impact of depression affected the entire country. As in many other New England cities and towns, economic recovery lagged behind that experienced elsewhere due primarily to lack of industrial diversification. To offset this situation, the Industrial Foundation of Greater Woonsocket was created in 1954 and, since that time, has been vigorously engaged in attracting new and diversified industry.

With respect to the administration of its affairs, Woonsocket seems to have fared normally both as a town and, until sometime after the turn of the century, as a city. In this regard, it is emphasized that it is not intended that anyone shall be criticized nor discredited in this presentation. Therefore, no effort will be made to trace developments in this respect nor to be precise concerning timing. It is sufficient to note that the local government retrogressed seriously and the situation worsened progressively. By the late forties, the City had become notorious for the vice and corruption which prevailed within its limits.

Of lesser importance, perhaps, but still highly significant, was the dereliction which prevailed simultaneously with respect to the City as a physical entity. With the exception of a sewage treatment plant completed in 1930 as a result of pressure exerted by State health authorities, the disregard and neglect of public facilities during this era were regrettable to say the least.

Schools not only had become outmoded and inadequate but hazardous conditions existed in many instances. Fire stations had become antiquated and were improperly located in relation to com-

munity expansion. Paved highways had been allowed to deteriorate and many miles of otherwise developed streets remained undrained, unpaved, or both. The entire water system had become inadequate. No action had been taken to supplement the impounded supply known for several years to have been grossly insufficient. Urgently needed treatment works never had been developed. Storage and distribution facilities had been neglected to the point where they were incapable of safely meeting quantitative and fire protection requirements. The sewerage system had not been expanded in keeping with structural development and appreciable portions of the City remained unsewered. Moreover, the system was incapable of receiving wastes from many industrial establishments faced with compliance with State pollution control laws under prohibitive circumstances. The previously mentioned sewage treatment plant had become ineffective in that only a portion of the domestic sewage and practically none of the industrial wastes originating within the community could be purified. No accomplishments had been realized with respect to providing modern and sanitary means of refuse disposal in lieu of the open dump which had been a source of justifiable complaints for many years. Nothing had been done to relieve traffic congestion and lack of parking facilities, both of which had become problems of tremendous import.

Faced with these and other undesirable conditions, a finally aroused public went to the polls in 1952 and overwhelmingly approved a new home rule charter, the first such document in the history of Rhode Island, and elected a reform administration. Pursuant to the provisions of that charter, the first non-partisan, off-year election ever held was conducted in April of 1953. Essentially the same administration was returned to office.

As soon as practicable after its inauguration on May 1, 1953, the administration approved the following transactions which were executed by the municipal agencies responsible for the respective functions:

1. An independent tax revaluation survey which was to be the basis of a tax assessment equalization as well as the foundation for a revised financial structure.
2. A study of all facilities relating to fire protection by the National Board of Fire Underwriters.

3. A comprehensive study of requirements essential to restore the physical plant of the Education Department to modern standards.
4. An investigation and report of improvements needed in the municipal highway system.
5. A traffic and parking survey (Federal-aid project).
6. A comprehensive study and recommendations concerning sanitation requirements including water, sewer and refuse disposal facilities.

Each of the foregoing actions have been completed and the respective reports have been presented to the City. In keeping with charter provisions, the results are being considered by the Planning Board which must approve all capital improvements. Present indications are that the Board will approve and present for legislative action a capital program based upon the recommendations contained in these reports and consistent with the financial capacity of the community. Unfortunately, the devastating impact of the recent flood may have an adverse effect upon the rate of progress but it is generally felt that the necessary work will be carried out expeditiously and, equally important, that it will be predicated upon sound financial and engineering principles.

At this time, I yield to John S. Bethal, Jr., Partner, Metcalf & Eddy, who will discuss in greater detail the study made and conclusions reached by that firm with respect to the sanitation needs of Woonsocket.