

Another Point on View on Winter on the Outer Cape

Rob Anderson, via Facebook – December 21 at 10:35 a.m. Provincetown, MA

When others get angry, they scream, they fight, they protest. I write. Here goes. It's long, I know. I'm sorry. But I hope, by the end, it illustrates an important point. Thanks for indulging me:

A Question of Focus

Six years ago, a reporter from the New York Times traveled to Provincetown in the beginning of January and declared in the newspaper of record that “even in winter, Provincetown shines.” While reporter Matt Gross found himself “stunned” by the relative silence of Commercial Street -- and, honestly, who hasn't? -- after poking around our little village, he found a town not in desolation, but “hibernation”: quiet but lively, with guest houses offering “bargain” deals, restaurants serving “fantastic” fare, galleries showing “legendary” art, and stores offering “jaunty” goods. In fact, by spending time at the tip of Cape Cod in the winter, Gross seemed to have gained a new appreciation of the place, to have found something special and unique and unexpected. He stumbled upon “a land of quiet bargains, where simpler pleasures emerge from the frenzy of summertime.”

Today, the paper returns to our town during the same time of year. But what Gross had seen as a “laid-back scene” six years ago, Katharine Seelye now labels a “deserted,” “hallowing out” “Potemkin village.” In Seelye’s Provincetown, stillness is emptiness, quietness is vacantness, and resiliency is desperation. Seelye took that same drive down deserted Commercial Street -- but then opted out of the pesky “poking around” part. “There are the store facades and about five people,” as she quotes one resident as saying. The images accompanying the piece drive home Seelye’s view of our town as one in distress: a cliched picture of a boarded up second home; a cliched picture of a gray, weary looking resident; a cliché picture of two men playing pool in an empty-looking bar. (Look, I get it: I spent 10 years in the halls of newspapers and opinion magazines. Writers pick an argument and drive it home. But that only works when the argument is solid, and that takes real work and real reporting to ensure. Not cliches.)

Ostensibly, Seelye’s article is a news item about a measure our selectman passed last week that lowers taxes on year round residents and raises those on second homeowners. If you were to only read this article and not actually visit our town and talk to the folks here -- which, of course, covers the vast majority of New York Times readers -- you’d walk away thinking two things: that this is the talk of the town, and that this is the only thing we are doing in Provincetown to combat the negative effects of living in a seasonal economy. And, to be sure, I’m sure second home owners are spending a lot of time talking about it.

But it is so far from what is actually happening on the ground here. As a restaurant owner and active participant in the life of our town, I’m fortunate to be able to interact with a lot of people day in and day out. I can say that over the past week, not one person has brought up the tax issue in the course of conversation. It’s just not that big of a deal. It’s not a game changer.

Here *is* what I have heard, and here’s what I have seen this winter:

Business is up in Provincetown. One business owner who has operated here in town for decades recently told me that he’s had the busiest December weekends he’s ever had. Weekends in particular are lively. In addition, a town that usually closes in the late fall, is making its first push to stay open until January. There’s life around here.

That push convinced my partner and I to keep our restaurant open for an extra month this year. Not only that, we decided to go full out and put on a holiday market in December and January this year (more on that later). Guest houses are reporting high booking rates. We have fireworks, a polar bear plunge, and great shows to look forward to in a few weeks.

This year, a new town manager, [David B. Panagore](#), is breathing new life into our city government. I am only speaking from the outside, but he seems to have energized his (already hard working) staff. He's emphasizing action and new ideas, decorum and respect, ingenuity over despair. There's a sense of hope and optimism for the first time in a long time. In addition, we have an energetic board of selectmen who are actively trying to solve our town's problems, coming up with new solutions instead of accepting the status quo as the only option.

[Provincetown 365](#), a group of energetic, hard working citizens, just turned one year old. In 12 months, the group restored a beloved piece of art on our pier, re-focused our town's conversation about housing, nudged along new forms of transportation to our town, re-imagined our streets, brought about new zoning bylaws, and, more importantly, gave people hope that things can change and get done around here if we just put our minds to it. It has started conversations that are bound to snowball and emerge as new plans of action.

We have an emerging economy of young entrepreneurs and leaders in the Outer Cape. Over the past few years, more and more young people have opened up businesses in town, and in Truro: [Chequessett Chocolate](#), [Salty Market](#), [The Canteen/ Happy Camper](#), [Pop+Dutch](#), [B.xclusive](#), [Mayflower Trolley](#), [Kiss and Makeup Provincetown](#), [KoHi Coffee Company](#), [Salt House Inn/ Eben House](#), [Nor'East Beer Garden](#) (I'm missing many: sorry). One of our own, [Julian Cyr](#), is running for state senate. At the holiday market here at the Canteen, we brought together a handful of young local artisans and entrepreneurs who live in town and are looking to grow their businesses: [Cook's Organics](#), [Bleat Media](#), [2of2](#), [Breakwater Goods](#). We have an amazing young theater troupe in the [Peregrine Theatre Ensemble](#). We have amazing young fellows at the Fine Arts Work Center. If you don't see all of this vibrant energy, you're not looking very hard.

In general, people are thinking productively and proactively about how to fix our town's ills. There's talk of re-opening our high school. More and more people are thinking about housing -- for our community, for our workers, for our homeless population. The governor's office visited town just last week. [Tom Donegan](#) is focusing town on drug abuse and addiction. We're talking about broadband. We're talking about the soul and future of our town.

Last, I want to touch upon something that I can't prove with examples and statistics, but I believe it to be true. This winter, there is a feeling of community and goodwill around town that I haven't felt before. I felt it most palpably at our holiday market over the past two weekends. Every slice of Provincetown showed up and mingled: wide-eyed kids meeting Santa; seniors happy to share a glass of wine and a tale or two; school kids singing carols; hipsters hanging out on a lazy Sunday; locals enjoying the chance to share time together after a busy season; tourists from up Cape and Boston looking for gifts; fishermen and their families; teenagers just looking for something to do; shop owners happy to have something different to eat; folks who haven't celebrated the holidays in years, cracking the tiniest of smiles. I saw this Provincetown -- and I felt it. It felt warm and hopeful and optimistic. It felt diverse and resilient and strong. Everyone mingled together because they wanted to mingle together. We want to be a community. We want to know each other and support each other. Not bicker about each other online, or fret about each other's tax breaks.

Any of this would have been a great opportunity for a newspaper to write a story about a quirky, vibrant community making things work in new exciting ways on the Outer Cape. About the many of us working day in and day out trying hard to cultivate the karass. (Google it.) About a new set of ideas and leaders. Instead, we get an article focused on a small new law. Taxes. Controversy. Neighbors against neighbors. A flyby.

Over the next few days, months, years, we as a community get to chose what to focus on, too. Let's be mindful and spend our time and energy wisely. Let's write our own intricate, complicated and beautiful story for ourselves, instead of letting this one define us down.