

City of the Damned: A Lawrence City Councilor Responds



Daniel Rivera responds to this month's story on "the most godforsaken place in Massachusetts."

BY Daniel Rivera - posted on 3/2/2012

In our March issue, Jay Atkinson writes in "City of the Damned" that Lawrence is "the most godforsaken place in Massachusetts" and details the reasons why: widespread crime, failing schools, crippled government, a controversial mayor, and more. There's been robust debate on Facebook, Twitter, and in the comments section of Atkinson's piece. Because of the passionate response we've received from our readers — especially those hailing from eastern Massachusetts — we invited Lawrence City Councilor Daniel Rivera to respond to the story. Here, Rivera shares his reasons why Lawrence doesn't the title of "damned."



The mills in Lawrence. (Photo via Wikimedia Commons.)

If Lawrence is a city of the damned — as you state in the headline of your story in the March issue of *Boston* magazine, piling on with many other media outlets to pain the City of Lawrence as a horrible place — it is the damned hardworking, the damned hopeful and the damned resilient. While your piece makes us out to be damned of our own doing, the real news is that we are standing at all.

Our crime is up because we have watched over \$11 million dollars in State aid evaporate while many of the poverty programs that concentrate poor people in places like Lawrence have not. We have also watched federal community policing dollars diverted to fight two wars. The fact

that the city was bankrupt two years ago is never mentioned. Nor that there were unaffordable labor contracts signed and that we had to borrow \$24 million dollars just to make it through the last two years. Also not mentioned is that we have balanced our budget two years in a row and begun the long road to financial health by making austerity cuts; as is evident in Europe and our own national debt debate, that's hard to do. We have done what many communities would not, cut critical services. Oh, and this article will not help us in getting up that unemployment rate you mentioned, since private industry is in no rush to have a corporate headquarters or manufacturing operations in a city labeled as damned.

Our schools are failing, yes, because of the actions of our former superintendent and neglect from our current and former mayor and former school board, but also because of the effect of the education reform law, that poured millions of dollars in to Lawrence while centralizing power in the superintendent. Now everyone is shocked that absolute power corrupted absolutely. Meanwhile Lawrence gets all the blame but, the State has been a full partner for the past decade in the system's inertia. Our schools are a reflection of all the national dilemmas facing America's public schools. Since you will make some money off this story, let me know if you want to help make it better. I can direct your publication to a few organizations in Lawrence helping kids learn.

In the article's drive to continue to make our mayor into a demon, you succeed in only cheapening your editorial integrity and hurting the community you claim to want to help. The downside of free and open elections is that we do not get to undo an election when the candidate elected does not live up to our expectations.

Finally, when I think about the many meanings of the word "damned," I will tell you many of us that call Lawrence home do not feel "condemned or doomed," especially to "eternal punishment" for living here; and I hope that your publication was not saying that Lawrence and its people are "detestable or loathsome." But I will say that as a City Councilor and taxpayer here in Lawrence, we are in "complete and absolute" focus to make our City better. We will add your publication to the many local media outlets that portray our City's story as unique and the worst City by far. I say that your piece is no more than another negative link in our Google search — another blow to our image, but not to our resolve. Many of us will continue to work to make Lawrence better — and damn anyone that thinks they can stop us.