



Discover Holyoke tours showcase the Paper City's past, present and future

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HOLYOKE – “Paris, New York and Holyoke are three cities to pay attention to in this world.”

Or so said Ruth Isabelle “Belle” Skinner, the late socialite daughter of William Skinner, the Holyoke industrialist and owner of the Cabot Street mansion that is now the modern-day **Wistariahurst Museum**.

Paris and New York notwithstanding, Holyoke was the center of attention Saturday as hundreds took part in Discover Holyoke, a daylong celebration of the city’s past, present, and perhaps as important, its future.

The event was sponsored by **PassportHolyoke.org**, a non-profit coalition that promotes the best arts, culture, history, and recreational assets of the city.



Staff Photo By John Suchocki
Donald T. Sanders, artistic director of the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts, gives a tour of the Victory Theater, targeted for restoration, as part of Discover Holyoke on Saturday

Attendees had the chance for walk-through tours of Wistariahurst, check out the renovation of the former Victory Theater on Suffolk Street, or to gain an overview of the city by means of an open-roof, double-decker bus.

Penni Mantorell, the Holyoke city historian and curator of Wistariahurst, who led the bus tour through the city, said the entire day was a big hit.

“This can only help change people’s perceptions of Holyoke – for the better,” she said.

She said the tours were filled with a mixture of young and old, and visitors to the city, natives and some expatriates as well.

Cindy Koch, a Holyoke native who moved away for about 20 years but recently moved back, said the bus tour was a chance to revisit the city. “I learned things I didn’t know before,” she said.

She said she has always been proud to be from Holyoke, although with the city's troubles with job losses, poverty and crime that has not always been easy. The tour helped re-energize that pride, she said.

"Holyoke is on the way back," she said. "There's no reason we can't bring it back."

The 30-minute tour, which began and ended at Wistariahurst, showcased the old and the new in the city. The bus wove along streets past the canals and former paper mills to the recently opened **multimodal transportation facility** on Maple Street to the site for the proposed **high-speed computing center** between Cabot and Appleton streets.

At the Victory Theater on Suffolk Street, more than 180 people took part in an open house.

Emily Mann, a volunteer with Americorps, said "We've had a lot of people who just want to come and see what is happening and what is going to be here."

The 91-year-old theater has been closed since 1979, and the interior is dominated by dust, the smell of mold and fallen plaster from the walls and ceiling.

But underneath the dilapidation were signs of what was once a grand 1,600-seat venue. "It did not have a bad seat in the house," said guide Donald T. Sanders of the **Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts**.

The non-profit organization purchased the vacant building for \$1,500 and now eyes a restoration at an estimated cost of \$27 million. It has set a goal of reopening as a theater on Dec. 30, 2012.

Maggie Magrath, of South Hadley, said she remembers coming to the Victory as during the late 1950s and 1960s, and even though it was beginning to get run down, she loved it.

"It was the coolest place to be," she said.



Staff Photo By John Suchocki
Visitors look around at the interior of the Holyoke's Victory Theater during an open house on Saturday as part of "Discover Holyoke."