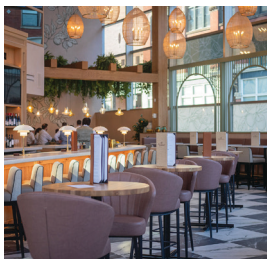
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THE NEWSPAPER

Fall 2026
Vol. 9 • Issue 4
A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
You can also view this paper digitally at worcesterchamber.org



A New View of Downtown 13

A Growing Downtown, A Stronger Regional Economy

by **VIRGINIA K. MURPHY**, DIRECTOR OF AFFILIATE PARTNERSHIPS, WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Over the next two years, if all goes as planned, 1,283 housing units will have been completed or will be under construction in downtown Worcester since 2026. As these units fill, local businesses could see more people walking the streets, exploring the neighborhood, dining out, and shopping. The map highlights developments that have been completed, are underway, or remain in the planning stages, revealing opportunities for businesses to fill vacant storefronts and commercial spaces. Could Worcester finally be on its way to becoming an 18-hour downtown, with more people living, working, and spending time in the heart of the city?

At the Chamber's Game Changers event this past October, one message was clear: Worcester needs housing options for people of all income levels and ages. Panelists shared insights into the policies and strategies needed to support continued growth in Worcester and across Central Massachusetts. One key consideration was revisiting restrictive ordinances that can limit housing development and constrain opportunities for growth.

Another opportunity lies in converting existing commercial buildings into housing. However, high renovation costs and the expense of bringing older buildings up to current building codes can make these projects financially unfeasible. As Mark Borenstein, partner at Prince Lobel, noted, "The panels did a great job explaining the difficulties associated with assembling capital stacks for affordable housing developments. Developers need to leverage every program possible to make these deals pencil." Finding innovative, cost-effective solutions will be essential to making these conversions possible, creating new housing opportunities while revitalizing historic buildings and bringing underutilized spaces back to life.



Above: Residences on Lincoln Square, A 55+ Community.
See page 5 for a map of new housing in Downtown Worcester.

These conversations extend beyond Worcester. Across Central Massachusetts, communities are exploring ways to address housing needs, encourage economic development, and preserve neighborhood character. In Auburn, Town Manager Dori A. Vecchio emphasized the importance of thoughtful growth, particularly in areas where housing and commercial activity can complement one another.

"As Auburn and the Central Massachusetts region continue to grow, it is important that we take a thoughtful, collaborative approach to housing development that meets the needs of residents across all income levels and stages of life. In Auburn, we would like to see both affordable and market-rate housing developed in strategic locations, particularly along the Route 12 and Route 20 corridors, where mixed-use districts can support local businesses and create vibrant places to live, work, and gather, while preserving our existing residential neighborhoods."

Auburn's vision reflects a broader regional goal: creating housing opportunities in locations that support economic growth while respecting the character of existing communities. In Worcester, this opportunity is especially

ECONOMY, P4

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With publication dates in February, May, August, and November, Chamber Exchange: The Newspaper is a quarterly publication written and produced by Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce staff and members. Content is geared to business professionals, members, elected officials, and engaged citizens.

Each quarter, 20,000 copies are mailed to members and business professionals and City of Worcester registered voters. The remainder are distributed among area businesses.

If you're interested in being a point of distribution, or would like to know more about placing an advertisement in the Chamber Exchange, please contact Kristen Luna at kluna@worcesterchamber.org. To contact the editorial staff, please email Karen Pelletier at KPelletier@worcesterchamber.org.

Unless otherwise noted, the editorial content herein is the opinion of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and does not reflect the opinion of any specific member, business, or partner of the Chamber.

DOWNTOWN: Worcester's Civic Gathering Place and Economic Foundation

by **TIMOTHY P. MURRAY**, PRESIDENT & CEO, WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



There is an inherent tension in municipal planning and decision-making regarding the deployment of staff time and funding between a municipality's downtown and its neighborhoods. Both have a multitude of needs and priorities that warrant substantial investment. Undoubtedly, for a city like Worcester, the neighborhoods represent a rich and diverse tapestry of people, businesses, and housing where families plant roots, build lifelong connections, and support small businesses that foster a strong sense of community and belonging.

At the same time, downtown serves not only as a municipality's front door, but also as a central gathering place for residents and visitors to enjoy the arts, sports, food festivals, and other civic events. The Hanover Theatre, the DCU Center, Mechanics Hall, the Worcester Common, and the Worcester Public Library are just a few examples of key civic assets in downtown Worcester, or the city's Central

FOUNDATION, P13

WORCESTER REGIONAL
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2026 calendar of events

NOVEMBER

Nov. 10 11:30am **Power of Women Luncheon POW**
Chamber Offices
Sponsored by: Country Bank

Nov. 12 8:00am **The Breakfast Club**
Keynote: Amy Peterson, General Manager of the DCU Center
Assumption University
Presenting Sponsor: TruNorthBank

Nov.12 4:30pm **7 Chamber MEGA Bash**
Great Wolf Lodge

Nov. 17 9:00am **Diverse Professional Roundtable**
WPI
Sponsored by: Fidelity Bank & The Hanover Insurance Group

Nov. 18 9:00am **Seminar Series** | Get a Grip On Your Business: How to gain clarity and traction for your business through EOS
Sponsored By: National Grid

DECEMBER

Dec. 5 11:30am **151st Annual Meeting**
DCU Center
Presenting Sponsors: The Hanover Insurance Group, UMass Memorial Health, UniBank, Worcester Railers, Worcester Regional Airport

Dec. 8 11:00am **Nonprofit Roundtable**
Beyond Heroics: Building Resilient Teams through Systems: Moving from Reactive Survival to Structural Endurance
Chamber Offices
Presenting Sponsor: Bowditch

Dec. 10 5:00pm **Business After Hours**
Greater Good Imperial Brewery
Sponsored by: Rockland Trust

Dec. 15 9:00am **Family-Owned Business Roundtable**
Preparing companies for a transition of ownership
Chamber Offices
Sponsored By: ArkMalibu, Rockland Trust & SALMON Health & Retirement

Save the Date 2027!

Jan. 25 5:00pm **Young Professionals Night Out**
Sponsorship Available

Mar. 7 3:00pm **Member Appreciation Night @ Worcester Railers**

April 1 12:00pm **Leadership Worcester Info Session**

May 6 8:00am **Worcester Women's Leadership Conference**
Sponsorship Available

FOR THE MOST UP-TO-DATE INFO AND TO REGISTER FOR ALL EVENTS, VISIT OUR WEBSITE: WORCESTERCHAMBER.ORG
All dates subject to change

WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE Business Owners DIALOGUE

BUSINESS OWNERS DIALOGUE (BOD) is a small group of non-competing business owners at the Chamber. BOD serves as a peer-to-peer advisory group, strategizing for how to face the challenges and opportunities that come their way. Find more info about this FREE Chamber member benefit on our website.

last updated 1/29/26

HIGH STAKES IN THE HEART OF WORCESTER:
Downtown Carries Heavy Tax Burden Amid Sea of Exemptions

by **MICHAEL KANE II**, DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & PUBLIC POLICY, WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

As municipal leaders navigate the City of Worcester's landmark $1.0 billion operating budget, the spotlight has turned once again to the engine room of municipal revenue: its property taxes.

Generating $435.5 million toward city operations, real estate taxes remain the single most critical locally controlled revenue stream. Yet a deeper look at the assessment rolls reveals a stark geographic reality: a tightly packed cluster of downtown properties punches well above its weight, even while surrounded by tax-exempt institutional giants.

In total Worcester counts roughly 47,444 taxable and exempt properties in its jurisdiction. Nevertheless, overall fiscal stability relies heavily on a small tier of corporate and commercial entities, with the top 10 taxpayers alone shouldering 11.79% of the municipalities entire tax levy. The largest among them are public utilities, led by National Grid, Eversource, and Verizon.

Nowhere is that concentration more apparent than in the downtown commercial core. Anchored by Saint Vincent Hospital (the city's third-highest taxpayer), the sprawling Mercantile Center complex (ranked 9th), and the transit-oriented residential tower at 145 Front Street (ranked 10th), these three downtown developments, excluding utility infrastructure, alone generate $8.335 million (roughly 2%) annually in property tax receipts.

Landmark Property / Entity	Taxpayer Ranking	Collective Tax Contribution
Saint Vincent Hospital	#3 Citywide	$5.348 Million
Mercantile Center	#9 Citywide	$1.666 Million
145 Front Street	#10 Citywide	$1.321 Million
Combined Total	**Key Downtown Cluster**	**$8.335 Million**

The fiscal productivity of Worcester's urban center expands rapidly when viewed through the lens of its designated commercial improvement zones.

The Downtown Business Improvement District (BID), covering roughly 78 acres across 140 to 150 individual parcels, generates an estimated $15 million to $20 million annually in municipal property taxes (approximately, 3.5% to 4.5% of the citywide total).

The Downtown Urban Revitalization Plan (URP), spanning a broader 137-acre footprint, encompassing CitySquare, the Theater District, the DCU Center corridor, and adjacent transit routes, holds a taxable assessed valuation estimated between $800 million and $1.1 billion. Powered by large-scale multifamily developments such as 145 Front Street, alongside mixed-use commercial space, the district yields $22 million to $30 million annually in property tax revenue (approximately 5% to 7% of the citywide total).

Together, these figures underscore the immense tax density generated by high-rise, mixed-use redevelopment compared to residential outer neighborhoods.

Downtown's outsized tax yield is especially remarkable given what isn't paying taxes. Across Worcester, tax-exempt properties, including colleges, universities, healthcare charities, religious organizations, and government buildings, account for 28% to 30% of the city's total real estate valuation. In the core downtown district, major public properties like City Hall, the DCU Center, the Worcester Trial Court, regional transit hubs, and social service providers occupy prime acreage without paying standard property taxes.

As city leaders plan future capital outlays and weigh recurring pressures over the split between residential and commercial tax rates, the fiscal math remains clear: Worcester's central business core provides the indispensable financial cushion that keeps municipal services running. Protecting and growing that downtown commercial base ultimately shields every neighborhood, worker, and resident across the city.

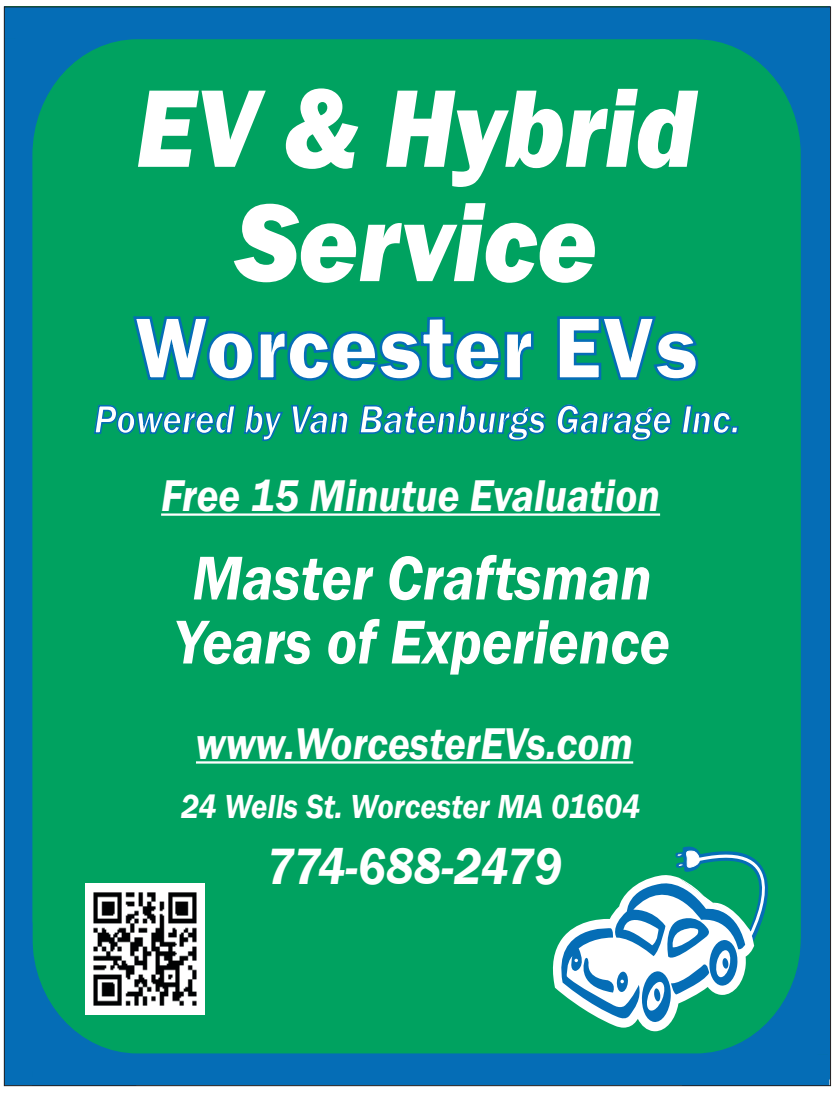
ECONOMY, CONTINUED

visible downtown, where new housing can increase foot traffic, support local businesses, and help create more vibrant urban areas.

More housing can also help address local workforce housing needs while strengthening the connection between where people live, work, and spend their money. As more residents move downtown, local businesses gain potential customers, successful businesses can attract additional investment, and that investment can contribute to a stronger regional economy.

This vision is not new. The Worcester Chamber's Phase II Housing Study, conducted with support from the WBDC in 2019, highlighted survey findings indicating that residents wanted a safe, walkable, mixed-use environment where they could shop for groceries, enjoy entertainment, and access a variety of everyday amenities. The goal is an 18-hour downtown, a place that remains active throughout the day and into the evening.

With new housing coming online and more development in the pipeline, Worcester has an opportunity to turn that vision into reality. The challenge now is ensuring that housing growth is matched by the businesses, amenities, and welcoming public spaces that give people a reason not only to live downtown, but to spend time there.



DOWNTOWN WORCESTER HOUSING

1,283 new homes on the way

Eleven residential developments planned, underway or recently completed, 2026–2028



2 The Clark Block (aka Shack's Building)

Photo: menkitigroup.com



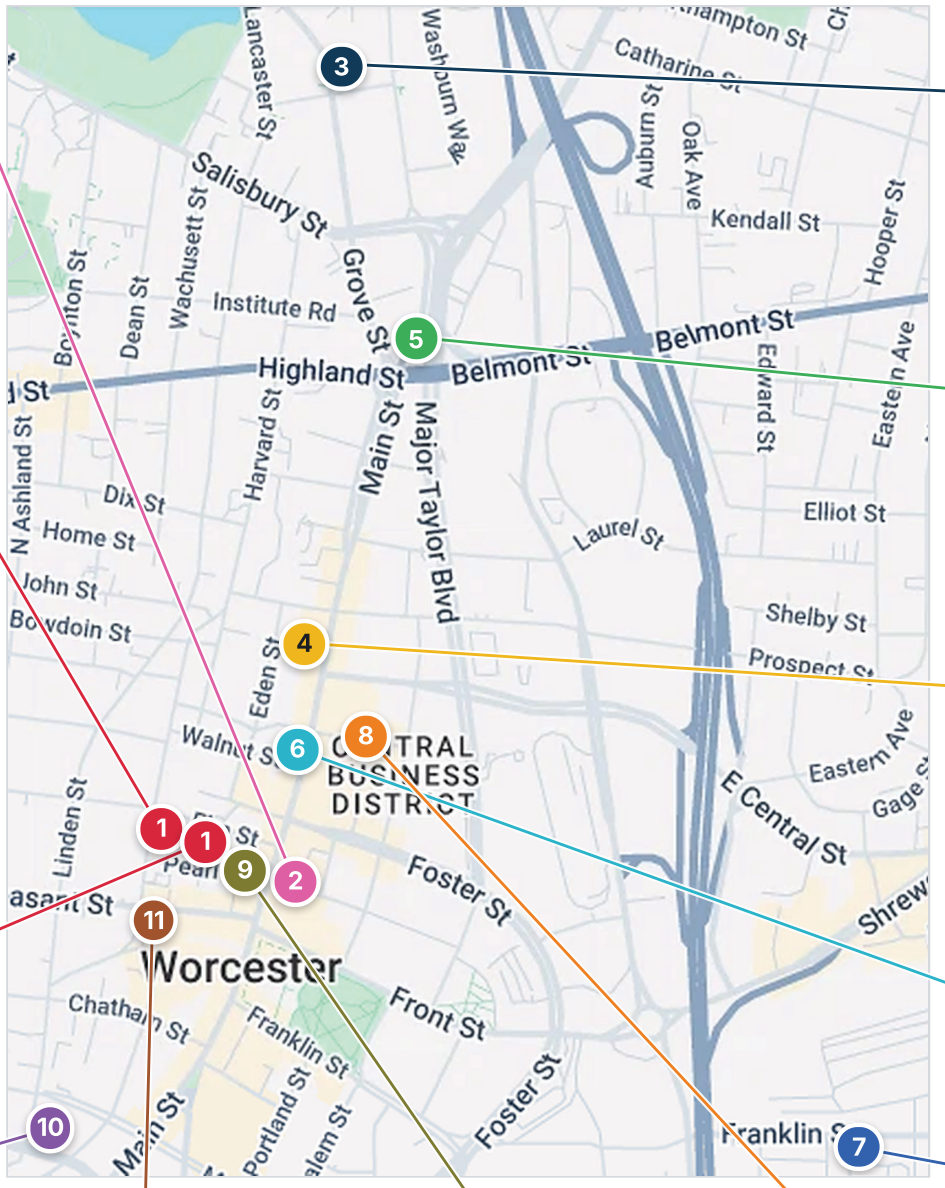
1 Altitude Worcester

Photo: Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce



1 Altitude Worcester

Photo: Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce





3 The Grove Village Lofts

Photo: Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce



5 The Residences on Lincoln Square

Rendering: lincolnsquareworcester.com



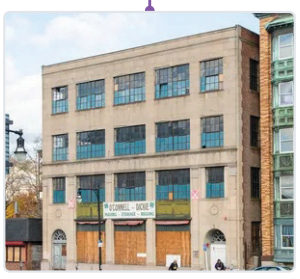
4 Olympic Lofts

Rendering: menkitigroup.com



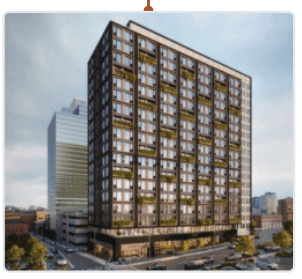
6 Lofts on Main

Photo: Zillow



10 The Hovey

Photo: Telegram & Gazette file photo



11 19-Story Pleasant Street Project

Rendering: Frank J. Quatela Architect, via Banker & Tradesman



9 The Pearl

Rendering: T&G, courtesy of Worcester Planning Board



8 One Exchange Place

Photo: cmk-partners.com



7 Benjamin on Franklin

Photo: Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

	DEVELOPMENT	UNITS	TYPE OF HOUSING	COMPLETION
1	**Altitude Worcester** 22 & 24 Elm St. · Synergy Investments	220	22 affordable condominiums and 198 market-rate apartments	Aug. 2026
2	**The Clark Block (aka Shack's Building)** 401–405 Main St. · The Menkiti Group	48	Mixed-use residential apartments	Aug. 2026
3	**The Grove Village Lofts** 90 Grove St. · 90 Grove Street LLC	46	Studios, one-bedroom and one-bedroom-plus-office units	Aug. 2026
4	**Olympic Lofts** 204 Main St. · The Menkiti Group	20	Mixed-use rental units and retail	Oct. 2026
5	**The Residences on Lincoln Square** 2 Grove St. · WinnDevelopment	80	Mixed-income 55+ apartments	Oct. 2026
6	**Lofts on Main** 316 Main St. · Cunningham Equities	23	Market-rate rental units	Nov. 2026
7	**Benjamin on Franklin** 274 Franklin St. · The Michaels Organization and GoVenture Capital Group	364	Market-rate and affordable apartments	Oct. 2027
8	**One Exchange Place** 1 Exchange Place · CMK Development Partners, LLC	44	Mixed-use rental units and commercial space	Q4 2027
9	**The Pearl** 17 Pearl St. · HHM Cube Properties	139	Mixed-income multifamily apartments	Delayed for funding and permits
10	**The Hovey** 27 Chandler St. · GoVenture Capital Group	74	Market-rate apartments	Proposed; Planning Board approved site Aug. 2026
11	**19-Story Pleasant Street Project** 56 Pleasant St. · Radson Development	225	Up to 225 apartments of mixed types	Proposed; Zoning Board approved site March 2026
	Total	**1,283**		

Development data compiled by Virginia K. Murphy. Completion dates are developer estimates. Map data © 2026 Google.

CONNECTED TO THE CORE: Leadership Worcester Alumni are Helping Shape the Heart of the City

by **KAREN PELLETIER**, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Walk through Downtown Worcester and the signs of change are everywhere. New businesses share blocks with institutions that have anchored the city for generations. Arts and cultural destinations bring people downtown. New housing is changing who calls the neighborhood home. Public and private investment continues to reshape buildings, streets and public spaces.

But there is another kind of infrastructure at work downtown that is harder to see: the people and relationships behind some of that change.

Across downtown, Leadership Worcester alumni are working in City Hall, small businesses, cultural institutions, banks, law firms, colleges, nonprofits and human service organizations. Their jobs and missions may look very different, but their work frequently intersects—and so do they.

Leadership Worcester, a program of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, brings together professionals from across sectors for a nine-month exploration of Worcester and the issues shaping its future. Participants learn about the city, but just as importantly, they learn from one another and build relationships with people whose professional worlds they might not otherwise encounter.

Downtown is a particularly visible example of what can happen when those worlds connect.

> *A thriving Downtown needs both meaningful, sustained investment and people who care enough to show up, because it's a neighborhood that belongs to all of us. (And, you know, a grocery store would be pretty nice, too.)*
>
> –Lisa Malo '22, Downtown Business Improvement District

Creating a Place People Want to Be

A successful downtown needs more than buildings. It needs people on the sidewalks, businesses they want to visit, events that bring them together and experiences that make downtown feel distinctly Worcester.

Lisa Malo, Marketing Director at the Downtown Worcester Business Improvement District, works at the center of that effort. From supporting downtown businesses to activating public spaces and improving the day-to-day experience of the district, Malo's work is focused on making downtown a place people want to visit.

Fellow Leadership Worcester alum Christon Carney, approaches that goal through arts and culture. His work as Education & Outreach Manager at Mechanics Hall has helped create opportunities for artists and cultural experiences that bring people together and contribute to Worcester's identity.

Their work illustrates something important about placemaking: it doesn't happen through one major project. It happens through dozens of organizations, businesses, events and individuals creating reasons for people to experience downtown—and return.

Connecting Development to Opportunity

Economic development is often most visible when a new building opens or a company announces an investment. Behind those moments is a much larger network of people working on business development, workforce, policy, financing, permitting and talent.

As Business and Community Advancement Manager for the City of Worcester's Economic Development Office, Margie Breault works across many of those lines, con-

LEADERSHIP, P15

LEADERSHIP WORCESTER

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Investing in Downtown Worcester's Shared Success

by **KATELYN M. O'BRIEN**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DOWNTOWN WORCESTER BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Businesses like August Coffee, Ace of Babes Vintage, Her Zen Studio, Golden Grain Artisanal Bread, Vivienne & VUE, and Alma Gaucha Brazilian Prime Steakhouse are adding to Downtown's vibrancy. Residential projects like Synergy's office-to-residential conversion on Chestnut Street and The Menkiti Group's redevelopment of the former Shack's Building on Main Street are creating new opportunities for Downtown living. And approximately 3.1 million visits were recorded within the Downtown Worcester BID's boundaries in 2025.

At the Downtown Worcester Business Improvement District (BID), we're focused on doing our part to support that progress and create the conditions for continued investment and growth.

Established in 2018, the BID is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit funded through assessments paid by commercial property owners within our district. Our footprint is relatively compact, but the collective, sustained investment of our property owner members supports services and improvements that benefit the broader Downtown community and the city as a whole.

We see our role as one of stewardship, taking a thoughtful, long-term approach to making Downtown a better place to do business, live, work, and visit.



For us, that starts with the fundamentals. Our Downtown Worcester Ambassadors work year-round cleaning sidewalks, removing graffiti, assisting visitors, supporting businesses, and providing supplemental snow removal. Our seasonal flower program is among our most-loved initiatives, adding color and beauty to the area from spring through fall. These everyday investments are visible reminders that someone cares about this neighborhood, and they make a meaningful difference in how Downtown looks, feels, and functions.

Our work on the Out to Lunch Festival & Farmers' Market offers another example of that approach in action. Working with the City of Worcester, we've reinvigorated this longstanding Downtown event while preserving what's always made it great. How? We used visitation data to inform a move from Thursdays to Wednesdays, extended programming by an hour, and drew on our team's imagination and know-how to strengthen production, marketing, and vendor support. We also grew the farmers' market and, with support from sponsors including Mass General Brigham Health Plan, introduced a SNAP match to improve access to fresh, local food in the heart of the city.

BID, P17





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Market on Exchange Returns Downtown, Continues a Growing Tradition

by **MIKE VIGNEAUX**, CONTRIBUTOR





Launched as a one-day event in 2024, Market on Exchange returned to its roots in both name and location this year for a six-month series of weekly farmers markets in the heart of downtown Worcester.

Celebrating the region's diverse food culture and local businesses, the event drew record crowds of more than 2,000 visitors on specific dates. Consumers from throughout Worcester County shopped for fresh produce and locally made goods in a welcoming community atmosphere on Exchange Street, between Main and Commercial streets.

Following a very successful series of markets held on Brussels Street in 2025 (Market on Brussels), Market on Exchange moved back to its original home for the 2026 season. The one-day market in 2024 was originally conceptualized by founders Stephanie Ramey of Rucker Investments and Jessica Walsh of Worcester Wares.

"After the fall market last year it became really evident that we had built a community," said Market on Exchange president Julia Moriconi.

The current market series, held on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. between May 17 and October 25, featured a variety of products from local farmers, food producers, artisans and small-business owners including fresh fruits and vegetables, baked goods, specialty foods, handmade crafts and other locally produced items.

A collective of diverse vendors have continued to be drawn to this event as it has grown in size and reputation throughout the last two years. The overall number of featured vendors has grown from 36 at the original event to more than 70 this season.

Vendor categories include alcoholic beverages, art, baby products and services, bread and sweets, farms and produce, food and beverage, meat, fish and dairy and pet products. There's even a food truck that caters specifically to dogs.

Continuing the philosophy of making fresh, healthy food available to the entire community, Market on Exchange now accepts SNAP/EBT benefits as a form of payment.

Beyond shopping, the market provides a dynamic gathering place for the community, including food trucks, live music and family-friendly activities. The event's move downtown also created a noticeable uptick in foot traffic according to event organizers.

"The pleasant surprise that we found on Exchange Street is that the neighborhood has responded so favorably," said Moriconi.

The owner of Mrs. Moriconi's Ice Cream, Moriconi noted that a high percentage of market patrons reside downtown and often walk to the event. For those visitors who drive, free street parking is available on Sundays. Validated free parking is also available for those using the Major Taylor Garage. Free public transportation is available via the WRTA's downtown bus routes.

Hosting the market downtown also allows shoppers an opportunity to visit a variety of area small businesses such as The Bra Shop, Off the Rails, Worcester Wares, Moynagh's Tavern, deadhorse hill, Rice Violet, Joe's Albums and Sweet Jane's Consignment.

The market series wraps up with its final traditional market of the season on Sunday, October 25. A Thanksgiving Market is set for November 22 with a Holiday Market to follow on December 20.

Putting on a series of Sunday markets throughout a sixth month span is no small task. Moriconi estimates that she has already put in well over 2,000 hours of work this season. Market on Exchange is primarily managed by three paid employees and a core of dedicated volunteers. Next year there is a possibility that one or two of the paid positions will be made full-time according to Moriconi.

Establishing itself as a highly-anticipated annual tradition in summer and fall, the Market on Exchange offers another creative and practical way to bring residents together while highlighting numerous independent businesses and local producers that contribute to the city's character.

For a complete listing of weekly vendors, parking plans and more, visit marketonexchange.com and follow Market on Exchange on Facebook and Instagram.

Small Business Corner



The Bra Shop

Small Business Saturday Shopping Guide

by **BREANNA DIBELLA**, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, DISCOVER CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

The holiday shopping season is here, and Worcester's independent businesses are ready to help you find something special for everyone on your list. Small Business Saturday, November 28, is an opportunity to discover unique gifts, support local entrepreneurs and invest in the neighborhoods that make our city distinctive.

Whether you're shopping for a foodie, fashion enthusiast, music lover or someone who has everything, Worcester offers an impressive variety of locally owned retailers. This year, shop small and gift big across five shopping destinations across the city, each with its own personality and plenty of reasons to support a local business.

Downtown Worcester

Downtown Worcester invites shoppers to explore within a walkable urban center. Park once and spend the afternoon discovering local treasures along Main Street and its surrounding blocks, with plenty of cafés and restaurants to enjoy along the way.

WORCESTER WARES

Celebrate Worcester pride with locally designed apparel, accessories and souvenirs that make memorable gifts with an unmistakable sense of place. Shop Worcester-themed T-shirts, sweatshirts, ornaments, stickers and other creative merchandise featuring designs by local artists. Located at the DCU Center, it's an ideal destination for anyone who loves the Heart of the Commonwealth.

THE BRA SHOP

Give the gift of comfort, confidence and personal style at this specialty boutique offering expert bra fittings and an inclusive selection of intimate apparel. Browse luxurious sleepwear, loungewear, lingerie and accessories, or choose a gift card so the recipient can enjoy a personalized fitting experience. It's a practical yet indulgent option for someone who deserves a little extra care.

DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT GIFT CARDS

For the foodie on your list, a downtown Worcester restaurant gift card is an invitation to enjoy the city's exciting culinary scene. Treat someone to coastal Mediterranean cuisine at Vivienne, cocktails and skyline views at VUE Cocktail Lounge, creative ramen and Japanese-inspired small plates at Chashu Ramen + Izakaya, and a steakhouse experience at Alma Gaúcha. With so many distinctive restaurants within walking distance of downtown's

BUSINESS, P11

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shops and entertainment venues, a dining experience makes a thoughtful gift for nearly anyone.

Canal District

The Canal District is made for an afternoon on foot. Centered around Green Street and Kelley Square, this lively neighborhood brings together independent boutiques, artisan shops, vintage treasures and specialty retailers, many tucked inside beautifully restored historic buildings.

BRI'S SWEET TREATS

Sweeten someone's holiday with handcrafted chocolates, confections and beautifully packaged treats from Bri's Sweet Treats. Gift boxes and seasonal sweets are especially well suited for teachers, coworkers, hosts and anyone with a sweet tooth. While visiting, explore the other independently operated businesses inside Worcester Public Market for additional gourmet gifts, such as at The Market Pantry.

Shrewsbury Street

Best known for its vibrant dining scene, Shrewsbury Street is also home to independent retailers. Plan a shopping outing around a leisurely bunch or lunch at one of the street's many locally owned restaurants.

ROOT & PRESS

This independent bookstore and café is a welcoming destination for readers of all ages. Browse a thoughtfully curated selection of books, including popular new releases and works by local authors, along with gifts for literary enthusiasts. Pair a novel with a gift card for to give the recipient a complete experience they'll enjoy long after the holidays.

Gift Shops Worth the Drive

Some of Worcester's most distinctive holiday shopping destinations are found inside its museums and cultural institutions. Beyond the traditional retail districts, these specialty gift shops offer thoughtfully curated collections inspired by art, science, nature and craftsmanship. Make a special trip to these Worcester attractions to find meaningful gifts while supporting the institutions that enrich our community.

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM SHOP

Find inspiration for the art lover on your list at the Worcester Art Museum Shop, where gifts reflect the museum's impressive collections and creative spirit. Browse art books, exhibition catalogs, prints, stationery, jewelry and artist-inspired accessories. For a particularly meaningful gift, consider a museum membership or a beautifully illustrated book celebrating the collection.

HANDCRAFTED SHOP AT WORCESTER CENTER FOR CRAFTS

Discover the art of elegant, tasteful gift-giving at Handcrafted, the retail shop at Worcester Center for Crafts. Featuring works by emerging and established American artists, the shop offers an exceptional selection of artisan ceramics, handcrafted jewelry, glassware, textiles and distinctive home accessories. From a beautiful handmade mug to a one-of-a-kind statement piece, each purchase supports the tradition of American craftsmanship.

ECOTARIUM MUSEUM SHOP

For curious kids, budding scientists and nature lovers, the EcoTarium Museum Shop is filled with gifts that make learning fun. Explore science experiment kits, educational toys, plush animals, children's books, nature guides and space-themed gifts that inspire discovery. It's an especially appealing destination for families seeking gifts that spark imagination and encourage hands-on exploration.

TIDEPOOL BOOKSHOP

Another great spot for the book lovers on your holiday list, TidePool BookShop offers a thoughtfully curated selection of new releases, literary classics, children's books and titles for every interest. This independent bookstore is known for its personal recommendations and welcoming atmosphere.

Make Your Holiday Shopping Count

Every purchase from a local business contributes to Worcester's economic vitality, supports local jobs and helps independent retailers continue bringing their creativity and expertise to the community. This Small Business Saturday, make time to explore a neighborhood you haven't visited recently, discover a new favorite shop and share your finds with family and friends. After all, the best gifts don't just bring joy to the people who receive them. They help the community we call home thrive.

Discover a complete shopping guide for Worcester and the surrounding region at DiscoverCentralMA.org.

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Chamber Welcomes its 2026-2027 StartUp Worcester Cohort

by **MICHAEL KANE II**, DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & PUBLIC POLICY, WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

For the 12th consecutive year, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and WorcLab are proud to welcome the newest cohort of StartUp Worcester. Presented with generous support from program sponsors M&T Bank and Millstone Law, StartUp Worcester is an incubator and business acceleration initiative designed to foster local entrepreneurship and help early-stage ventures launch, scale, and remain in the Central Massachusetts region.

Core benefits of the program include, a full one-year membership to the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, providing access to regional networking, visibility, business development events, and advocacy. Also free co-working space, desk access, conference facilities, and prototyping lab resources at WorcLab's downtown incubator facility.

Further entrepreneurs are able to be fully embedded in the Worcester StartUp community with specialized workshops, investor pitch opportunities, and one-on-one mentorship pairings and hands on assistance from SCORE.

The 2026-2027 StartUp Worcester Cohort

LEXAGY LLC

Founded by Raymond Carville, Lexagy LLC is a bootstrapped, Worcester-based software company currently in beta testing for its subscription-based family reading and community-sharing platform ahead of a November 2026 launch.

BORN FOR MORE

Founded by Michaelangelo Shavies, Born For More is a youth-empowerment social enterprise that pairs mentorship with a gamified mission platform, aiming to generate up to $25,000 this year through curriculum licensing and pilot programs.

VANGUARD INSIGHT

Co-founded by Andrew and Jacqueline Swenson, Vanguard Insight is an early-stage, self-funded Worcester consulting firm specializing in efficient personnel management local businesses and nonprofits.

GOLDEN TRANSPORTATION AND LOGISTICS LLC

Founded by Navy veteran Maxwell Adu-Boakye, this pre-launch non-medical transit service leverages 13+ years of healthcare contracting experience to provide dignified, dependable transportation for Worcester County veterans, seniors, and individuals with disabilities.

GREENHOUSE BREAD

Founded by head baker Vanthara Hill with technical support from David Hill, Greenhouse Bread is a bootstrapped Millbury bakery finalizing its municipal licensing to bring sustainable, artisan sourdough directly to local markets and pop-ups.

WUOTI LAW LLC

Founded by Amanda Wuoti, Wuoti Law LLC provides accessible, unbundled contract legal services across Massachusetts and Rhode Island, having generated $45,000 in its first year while serving roughly 30 active clients.

MY COLLECTIVE

Founded by Crystal McGlynn, My Collective blends mindfulness, movement, and art through proprietary wellness frameworks at its Sturbridge studio while actively working to scale B2B corporate wellness packages.

DEWAR PERFORMANCE

Founded by Melissa Dewar, Worcester-based Dewar Performance provides transparent SEO and website strategies for local contractors and service providers, aiming to establish repeatable systems and recurring retainer revenue.

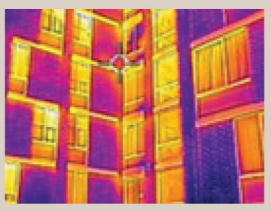
ARTIST HEALTH COVERAGE

Led by Magdelene Barjolo, Artist Health Coverage is a nonprofit initiative in the early validation phase that helps freelance creatives access affordable healthcare through enrollment assistance, venue partnerships, and member-owned coverage models.

AVANZA ABILITY PARTNERS INC.

Founded by Mayerling De La Rosa and two partners, Avanza Ability Partners provides bilingual navigation and culturally responsive support for families of individuals with developmental disabilities while preparing for state agency contracting.

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A NEW VIEW OF DOWNTOWN

Vivienne and VUE Invest in the Heart of Worcester

by **STEFANIE SILVA**, VP OF PARTNERSHIPS AND MEMBER ENGAGEMENT, WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

For more than two decades, Mike Covino and Niche Hospitality Group have been part of Worcester's evolving restaurant scene. Long before downtown's current wave of development, Covino saw hospitality as a way to create energy and identity in the heart of the city.

His earliest downtown investments included The Citizen and The People's Kitchen, concepts that arrived at a time when, as Covino puts it, downtown "needed love and attention." They brought something new to the neighborhood and helped demonstrate the role restaurants and hospitality could play in bringing people downtown.

Today, Covino is making another bet on Main Street, this time with two concepts designed to offer very different experiences under one roof.

Vivienne, at street level, and VUE, occupying the 23rd and 24th floors above it, represent an investment not only in a building, but in the idea of downtown Worcester as a destination.

Worcester has changed considerably since Covino's first downtown ventures. The city has grown as a dining destination, with more places to eat, live and shop. But for Covino, realizing downtown's full potential requires businesses that give people a deliberate reason to be there. That thinking helped shape Vivienne.

Rather than simply blending into the glass tower rising above it, the street-level restaurant was designed to have an identity of its own. The structure, once a bank, offered an opportunity to transform an existing downtown space into something distinctive.

The goal is an experience that feels elevated and memorable while remaining approachable. At a time when full-service restaurants increasingly compete with the convenience of dining at home, Covino believes creating that kind of experience matters.

VUE offers a different perspective, literally. High above Main Street, the venue draws on the history of the former Plaza Club while creating a contemporary gathering place overlooking Worcester. Covino and his team wanted to retain some of that nostalgia rather than erase it.

The result is a space intended to feel upscale but relaxed, with the flexibility to accommodate both everyday visits and special occasions. Its two floors also give VUE a role beyond traditional dining and nightlife. The venue hosts board meetings, fundraisers and annual meetings, as well as birthdays, showers and other social celebrations.

Together, Vivienne and VUE create complementary reasons to spend time downtown. A guest can



Mike Covino

NICHE, P17

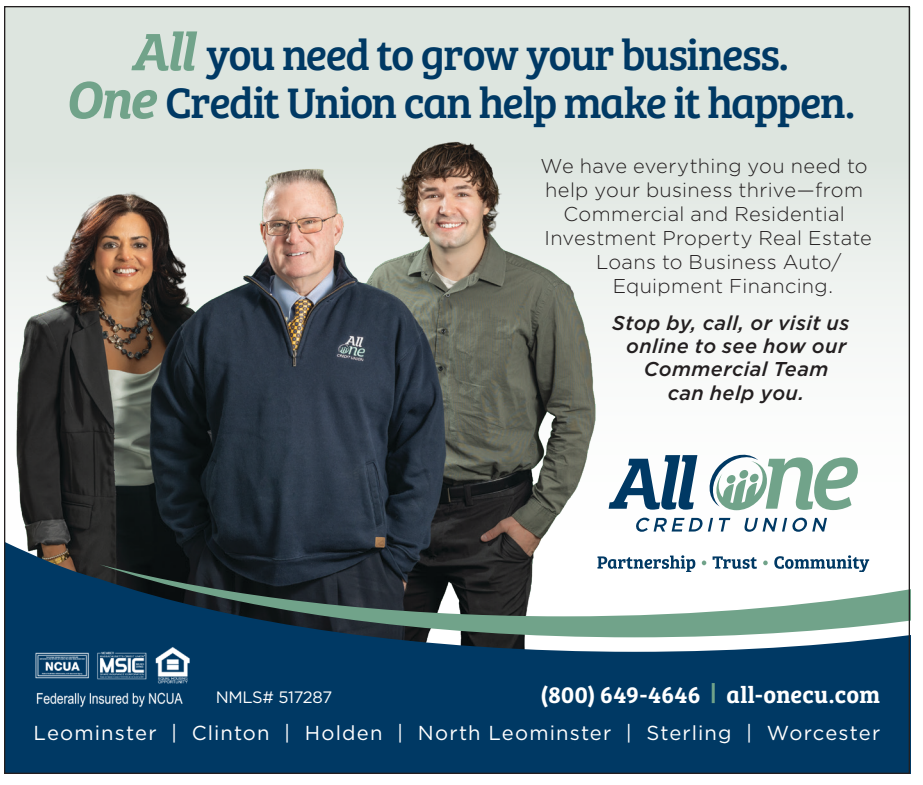
FOUNDATION, CONTINUED

Business District (CBD) as it is sometimes known.

Moreover, as Worcester continues to rectify unfortunate urban design decisions and transportation projects made during the 1960's and 1970's such as the construction of I-290, the West Side Artery, and the Worcester Center Galleria, downtown is again becoming far more connected and walkable to adjacent neighborhoods. Additionally, with the creation of thousands of new housing units, downtown is re-emerging as a residential neighborhood. Daily school bus pickups and dropoffs and an expanding retail footprint clearly reflect this burgeoning downtown community.

However, as my colleague Michael F. Kane II, the Chamber's Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy, notes in this edition of The Chamber Exchange Newspaper, downtown Worcester's economic impact and contribution to the municipal tax base is profound. It is in our collective interest to ensure our downtown remains not only a welcoming destination for Worcester residents and visitors alike, but also a growing engine of economic activity that helps fund essential city services throughout all of Worcester. It is for this reason that we have dedicated this issue of The Chamber Exchange Newspaper to updating our readers on the momentum building in Downtown Worcester, and the many of specific projects behind this growing activity.





Downtown Worcester Takes Center Stage: A Collaborative Arts and Culture Scene

by **MIKE VIGNEAUX**, CONTRIBUTOR

From Broadway productions and nationally recognized musical acts to community performances and intimate live music, downtown Worcester's arts and cultural venues are working together to create a vibrant destination for residents, visitors and businesses.

On any given evening, the soundtrack of the city can take many forms. It might be the applause of an audience enjoying a production at the Hanover Theatre, the energy of a rock concert at the DCU Center or the Palladium, the rich acoustics of a classical performance at Mechanics Hall or the sounds of a local musician entertaining a crowd at Off the Rails.

With a diverse collection of venues offering entertainment for a wide range of audiences, Worcester has established itself as a regional hub for arts, culture and live entertainment. Just as important, the venues contribute to a larger experience that encourages people to spend an evening downtown rather than simply attend a single event.

At the heart of that experience is a shared understanding that a thriving arts and entertainment district benefits the entire community.



The grand staircase at the The Hanover Theatre and Conservatory for the Performing Arts

Hanover Theatre/JMAC

The Hanover Theatre and Conservatory for the Performing Arts is a cornerstone of Worcester's cultural landscape, welcoming audiences for Broadway touring productions, concerts, comedy and other live performances. Its presence has helped attract more than three million visitors since 2008 while strengthening Worcester's reputation as a destination for high-quality performing arts. In fiscal year 2025, Hanover welcomed 150,000 patrons for performances on the main stage in addition to those who attended free outdoor shows at Francis R. Carroll Plaza.

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Alan Seiffert, who moved here two years ago to become the president and CEO of the Hanover Theatre, notes that the city is unique not only because it offers something for everyone, but the arts and cultural institutions also understand and embrace the importance of working together.

"There is a collegiality and a collaboration," said Seiffert. "We very much believe that all boats rise here. It's such a great vibe."

Through the Jean McDonough Arts Center (JMAC) at 20 Franklin Street, the Hanover helps program a more intimate cultural experience. Home to the 200-seat BrickBox Theater and Worcester PopUp, the JMAC provides space for local artists, creative organizations, exhibitions and performances that reflect the diversity of the region's arts community.

Together, the two venues demonstrate how established performing arts institutions and accessible community spaces can complement one another, creating opportunities for both emerging artists and experienced performers.

Julie Holstrom, director of projects for the Worcester Business Development Corporation, was highly involved with the redevelopment of the 20 Franklin Street property as part of the Theater District Master Plan in 2012 and the launch of a Business Improvement District (BID) in 2019.

"You have all of these different organizations that have decided to invest in the downtown but are also working with each other," said Holstrom. "It's nice to see everybody rowing in the same direction. That's when you see real progress."

Hanover offers upcoming performances such as The Bodyguard (Nov. 6); Menopause The Musical (Nov. 11); Comedian Bert Kreischer (Nov. 14); The Nutcracker (Nov. 27); The 2026 Boston Pops Holiday Concert (Dec. 4); and A Christmas Carol (Dec. 17-23).

Mechanics Hall

Further down Main Street, Mechanics Hall offers a different but equally intriguing experience. Renowned for its architecture and exceptional acoustics, the historic concert hall provides an elegant setting for musical performances, cultural programming and special events. Its enduring presence connects Worcester's rich history with its contemporary cultural identity.

An estimated 100,000 patrons annually walk through its ornate front doors to attend close to 200 events ranging from classical music to comedy shows and family-oriented matinees.

CULTURE, P16



A full house for a patriotic performance at Mechanics Hall

LEADERSHIP, CONTINUED

necting businesses and partners with the resources and relationships needed to move projects forward.

Leadership Worcester alum Anh Dao, through her work as the Worcester Jobs Fund Director, brings another essential piece to that equation: people. Businesses need workers, and residents need pathways to careers that allow them to participate in the region's economic growth.

Together, their work represents two sides of the same challenge. A thriving downtown needs investment and jobs—but it also needs intentional connections between the opportunities being created and the people who live here.

Making Sure People Are Part of the Story

Downtown Worcester isn't simply a business district or destination. It's a neighborhood, and its future is tied to the people who live here.

Leadership Worcester alumni Kim Davenport, CEO of Edward Street and Ronald Waddell Jr., Executive Director/Co-Founder of Legendary Legacies approach that work from different directions.

Davenport's work centers children and families, including the systems that help families access quality early education and care. Waddell's work focuses on mentorship, opportunity and creating pathways forward for individuals who have too often been disconnected from traditional systems.

Their presence in the downtown ecosystem broadens the definition of what revitalization means. Success isn't measured only by new investment or activity. It also matters whether Worcester residents can see themselves in the city's future and access the opportunities that growth creates.

The Network Behind the Work

Leadership Worcester cannot take credit for what these alumni accomplish. They bring their own expertise, commitment and leadership to organizations doing important work every day.



Leadership Worcester alumni at Out To Lunch downtown. Photo Credit Mike Hendrickson

What Leadership Worcester can do is make their worlds a little less separate. The economic development leader knows the workforce leader. The placemaking professional knows the community advocate. The nonprofit leader knows someone at City Hall, at a bank, at a college or running a business down the street.

And after spending nine months learning about Worcester together—hearing from its leaders, confronting its challenges and seeing parts of the community outside their everyday experience—they have more than a stack of business cards. They have relationships they can activate.

That may be one of Leadership Worcester's most meaningful contributions to the city.

The challenges facing Downtown Worcester don't belong to one organization, industry or City department. Neither do its opportunities.

The buildings and streets may be the most visible evidence of downtown's evolution. But behind them is another asset Worcester continues to build: a network of people who understand that their work is connected—and increasingly, know one another well enough to do something about it.

Learn more: LeadershipWorcester.com.

Left: DCU Center concert
Center: Hockey at the DCU Center
Right: Off the Rails

CULTURE, CONTINUED

"This idea of a cultural corridor downtown is really important. We're all different sizes with different attributes to each venue," said Meghan Montaner, executive director of Mechanics Hall. "We each have a place in that corridor and we each are contributing to the art and culture scene downtown."

Must see shows scheduled here include comedian John Fisch (Nov. 27); Karen as Dolly: A Hollyest Dollyest Christmas Tribute Show (December 4); and the 46th annual Mass Symphony Orchestra holiday pops concert (December 12).

DCU Center

The DCU Center brings large-scale entertainment to the city, hosting concerts, sporting events and other major gatherings. Its capacity to welcome substantial audiences makes it an important part of Worcester's ability to attract regional visitors and nationally recognized acts.

Upcoming can't miss events are: The Rock Orchestra: Arena of Fire (Nov. 11); Trey Anastasio and Billy Strings: A Benefit for Divided Sky (Nov. 20 and 21); and Trans-Siberian Orchestra - The Ghosts of Christmas Eve (Nov. 28). For sports fans, the Worcester Railers offer exciting ECHL hockey action all winter long.

The Palladium/Off the Rails

Audiences seeking a different kind of energy will be drawn to the Palladium, which has long been a space dedicated to live music, particularly rock and metal, attracting passionate fans and touring performers to Main Street. In recent years, the Palladium Outdoors concert series has hosted large outdoor summer concerts in the parking lot behind the main venue.

Rounding out the mix is Off The Rails, which combines dining, hospitality and live entertainment in a rustic setting. Patrons can enjoy a meal, gather with friends and experience great live music up close and personal.

While each venue has its own identity, audience and programming, collectively, they create a cultural ecosystem that offers something for nearly everyone. The strength of downtown Worcester's arts and cultural district lies not only in the individual venues but also in how their offerings complement one another.

Collaboration also means recognizing that a successful arts and cultural district requires more than individual ticket sales. It depends on partnerships, shared promotion, accessible public spaces and a welcoming environment that makes visitors want to return.







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BID, CONTINUED

The results: average attendance per event has increased 127% since 2024, and total attendance more than doubled from 2025 to 2026 alone, reaching more than 15,000 across ten dates this summer.

Some of Downtown's best new ideas come from others. RICEMA's first-ever Worcester Night Market this September is a great example of what's possible through creative programming and collaboration with neighboring businesses, including Chashu Ramen + Izakaya. An estimated 7,000-plus visits were recorded within the event footprint, bringing an energetic — and hungry! — crowd to Franklin and Portland Streets.

The BID can't do it all ourselves, but we can help others bring their visions to life through Ambassador support, shared event resources, and collaboration.

Looking ahead, we're also investing in how people experience and navigate Downtown. With $250,000 recently awarded through the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI) Capital Grant program, in partnership with the City of Worcester, the BID is set to introduce new digital kiosks and refresh Downtown's street banners. The first indoor kiosks are planned for three Downtown locations, with outdoor placements to follow. Together, these improvements will strengthen Downtown's visual identity, improve wayfinding, and help connect people with local businesses, destinations, and experiences.

Our vision remains an 18-hour Downtown that's welcoming, active, connected, and economically and culturally thriving. We're already seeing that vision take shape. The work ahead is about staying committed to where we want to go while being willing to adapt how we get there, alongside the property owners, businesses, residents, and community partners who share in Downtown Worcester's future.

Data Note: Visitation, foot traffic, and event attendance estimates are based on Placer.ai location analytics, provided by the Downtown Worcester Business Improvement District.

NICHE, CONTINUED

have dinner at Vivienne before heading upstairs to VUE, or watch the sunset over Worcester from VUE before going downstairs for dinner.

Both experiences are intentionally different, but they share a common purpose: making downtown a place where people want to gather.

For Covino, a successful downtown cannot be created by restaurants alone.

More housing means more residents and, in turn, more foot traffic to support restaurants, retailers and other businesses. He would like to see additional restaurants and bars open along Main Street and more businesses contribute their own character to the neighborhood.

There are practical challenges, too. Covino points to safe, well-lit and accessible parking and sidewalks as an important part of creating a successful downtown experience.

He also believes downtown businesses and organizations have to consider the neighborhood through the eyes of a visitor. Was parking easy? Did it feel safe to walk from one destination to another? Were other businesses open nearby?

Those individual touchpoints collectively shape how people perceive downtown Worcester.

That makes downtown's continued progress a shared effort. Property owners and developers, locally owned businesses, the Worcester Business Improvement District, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and others all have a stake in creating an environment where people want to live, work, dine and shop.

Perhaps the most important contribution Vivienne and VUE can make is less tangible: changing how people feel about downtown.

Covino wants guests to leave with a memorable experience connected to Worcester itself. From the moment someone first looks up the restaurant online through the end of their visit, the goal is to make them feel seen and valued.

For Vivienne, that means pairing an upscale atmosphere and attentive service with a price point intended to make the experience accessible. With consumers paying particularly close attention to value, Covino sees delivering an exceptional experience as essential.

But there is a larger ambition behind that hospitality.

Every memorable dinner, celebration, corporate gathering or sunset overlooking the city becomes another opportunity for someone to form a positive connection with downtown Worcester. And those experiences can accumulate.

Looking five or ten years ahead, Covino envisions a downtown with more market-rate and affordable housing, completed redevelopment projects and businesses with enough depth and identity to create a thriving neighborhood.

Restaurants are only one part of that picture. Hotels, shops, housing, entertainment and other locally rooted businesses all contribute to a downtown that feels active and cohesive. For Covino, what ties those pieces together is Worcester itself. "Worcester has a story — downtown should be the voice."

Vivienne and VUE are Niche Hospitality's latest contribution to telling that story: one from the sidewalk on Main Street, and the other from high above the city.







Top left & right: Vivienne
Left: Vue

Upcoming Affiliate Chamber Events

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Auburn
auburnchamberma.org

Holiday Celebration
December 8, 2026
5:30 pm - 7:30 pm
Auburn Elks
754 Southbridge St.
Auburn, MA 01501

Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce
blackstonevalley.org

48th Annual Meeting
November 19, 2026
7:15 am - 9:00 am
Pleasant Valley Country Club
95 Armsby Rd, Sutton, MA 01590

Jingle & Mingle
December 2, 2026
5:30 pm - 7:30 pm
Vaillancourt Folk Art
9 Main St., Suite 1-H Sutton, MA 01590

Chamber of Central MA South
cmschamber.org

Fun at Five
December 17, 2026
5:00 pm
Publick House

Clinton Area Chamber of Commerce
clintonareachamber.org

Business After Hours / George Bailey Award
December 9, 2026
5:00 pm - 7:30 pm
Icon Museum & Study Center
Clinton, MA

LABO
labous.org

Latin American Business Expo
April 24, 2027
Save your seat for 2027!

Wachusett Area Chamber of Commerce
wachusettareachamber.org

Wachusett Women's Connection
November 18, 2026
7:30 am - 9:00 am
Holden Senior Center
1130 Main Street
Holden, MA 01520

Webster Dudley Oxford Chamber of Commerce
wdochamberma.org

Holiday Party
December 1, 2026

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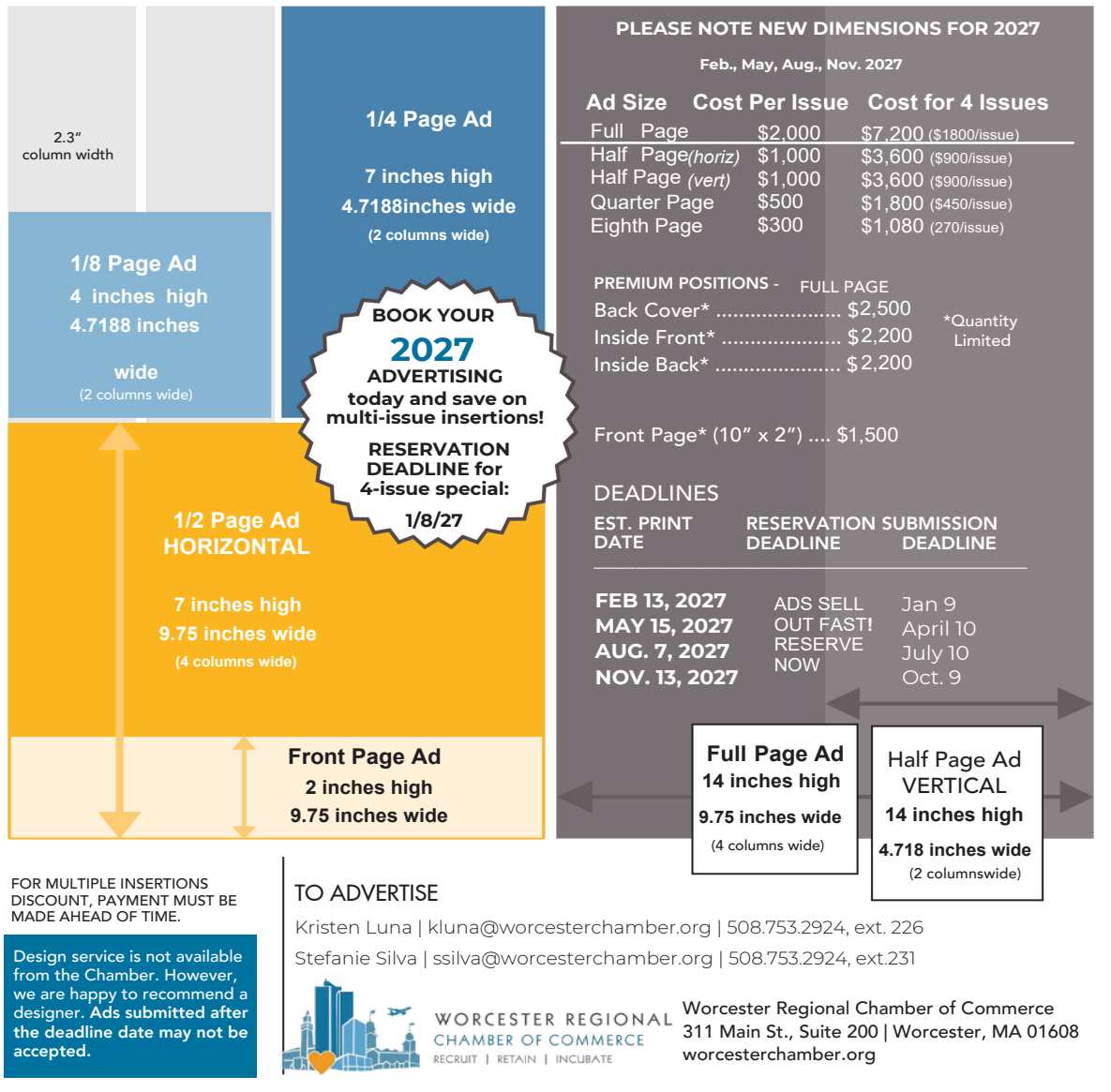
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CIRCULATION | More than 17,000 copies are printed and distributed as follows:
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by **MONIQUE JOSEPH**, PRESIDENT, DISCOVER CENTRAL MA



There's something special about downtown Worcester during the holiday season. Historic architecture illuminated by festive lights, the sounds of live entertainment, families gathering on Worcester Common and local businesses welcoming shoppers through their doors. It's a holiday experience that feels distinctly Worcester, bringing together cherished traditions and the exciting new energy shaping our downtown.

Adding to the excitement this year is the new Worcester Holiday Market, presented by Pulse Magazine. Taking place November 19-22 and December 3-6 at Mercantile Center, the market brings together local makers, artisans and small businesses for eight days of holiday shopping, food and festive experiences. It's a wonderful opportunity to discover unique gifts while celebrating the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of our region.

For a journey into the past, Salisbury Mansion's Home for the Holidays tours invite visitors to explore beautifully decorated historic rooms inspired by this year's theme, A European Grand Tour. Presented by the Museum of Worcester in collaboration with Preservation Worcester, the tours begin November 27 and continue on select evenings into January.

Below: Salisbury Mansion

Right: Ice skating on Worcester Common Oval





On December 4, the Festival of Lights transforms Worcester Common into a festive gathering place, with holiday illumination, entertainment and seasonal activities. Surrounded by City Hall and downtown's historic buildings, the celebration captures the sense of community that makes this annual tradition so memorable.

Straight out of a Hallmark movie scene, the Worcester Common Oval outdoor ice skating offers families and friends a classic winter outing in the heart of the city. Pair a visit to the rink with holiday hockey at the nearby DCU Center, where the Worcester Railers bring family-friendly entertainment to downtown.



On December 5, Music Worcester presents the Worcester Chorus performing Handel's Messiah at Mechanics Hall, a beloved holiday concert in one of the country's most beautiful historic performance venues. The tradition has deep local roots: the Worcester Chorus performed Messiah during Mechanics Hall's grand opening weekend in 1858. Hearing its famous "Hallelujah" chorus in that magnificent setting is an experience uniquely connected to Worcester's musical heritage.

Of course, no downtown holiday outing is complete without enjoying Worcester's exceptional dining scene. From a casual lunch between shopping stops to dinner before a performance, downtown's restaurants offer countless opportunities to gather and celebrate.

What makes downtown Worcester special isn't any single event or attraction. It's the ability to experience so much in one place: an afternoon of shopping, an evening of entertainment, a stroll beneath the holiday lights and traditions that bring generations together.

This season, I encourage you to rediscover downtown Worcester. Bring your family, invite your friends, support a local business and make new memories in the heart of our city. These are the experiences that make the holidays uniquely Worcester. And you'll only find them downtown.

Discover Central MA is the official Regional Tourism Council of Worcester and Central Massachusetts. To become a member or corporate sponsor, email Breanna DiBella, Marketing Director, at bdibella@discovercentralma.org. For more information on local dining, events and more, visit DiscoverCentralMA.org.

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