

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Special Report - Pages A8-14

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DAWN OF A NEW ERA

An aerial photograph of a city street, likely in Worcester, Massachusetts, showing a mix of urban architecture, including brick buildings and modern structures. A large, stylized headline is overlaid on the image, reading "Worcester redevelopment renaissance surges ahead". The text is in a white, serif font with a black outline, giving it a classic, newspaper-like appearance. The headline is positioned across the top half of the image, following the curve of the street below. The background shows a street with cars, sidewalks, and various buildings, some of which appear to be under development or renovation, consistent with the headline's message. The overall tone is positive and forward-looking, highlighting the city's progress in redevelopment.

Worcester redevelopment renaissance surges ahead

Sprouting from what City Manager Edward Augustus, Jr. calls “big, dead walls” at the now-razed Worcester Center Galleria mall complex, a group of massive new downtown redevelopment projects are accelerating this spring along with significant industrial expansion in abutting neighborhoods.

Facilitated by \$90 million in state and federal funds to demolish the former mall along with \$10 million in city district improvement financing to modernize most of the area's key streets and infrastructure, more than \$300 million in private investment has poured into the city over the last five years.

Developer interest was partially garnered

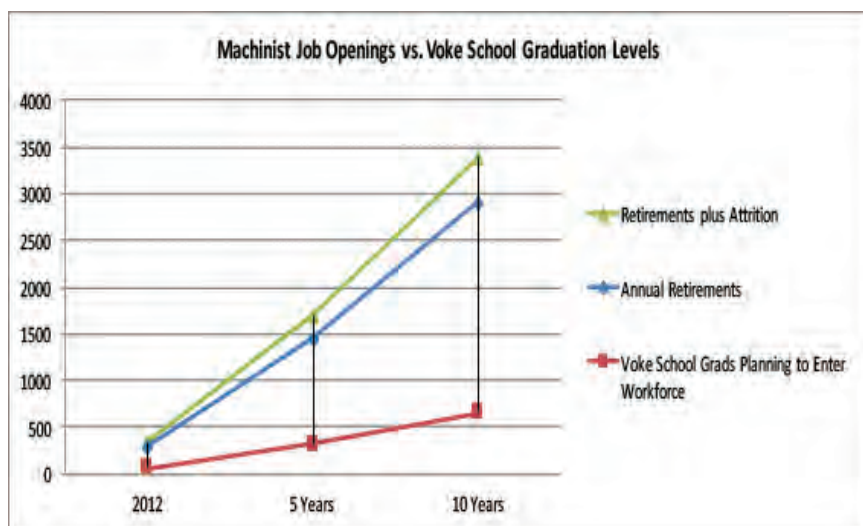
through a bevy of city-infused tax increment financing deals downtown and in outlying neighborhoods. Nonetheless, today's historic efforts are completely re-shaping Worcester's skyline. Many of the new and revitalized buildings rising downtown, situated nearby at the South Worcester Industrial Park and biotech Gateway Park, or supporting new job creation among expanding Quinsigamond Village and Canal District manufacturers are either now open, in next phase development, or slated to launch at various points this year.

In the downtown area alone, a multi-phase \$70 million downtown garage and twin office towers development nears the finish line. The city center's future \$30 million AC Marriott hotel

continues at a rapid pace. A new \$21 million Homewood Suites hotel in Washington Square just opened.

Around City Common, the Grid District's multitude of 365 modern apartments and mix of restaurants progresses with more unit and lobby openings soon. Nearby, Roseland Residential Trust's \$90 million upscale apartment homes project is well under construction.

And just outside the downtown area, major new building continues to advance at commercial and industrial developments helping to attract more companies to relocate here while encouraging existing firms to remain and expand.

SPECIAL REPORT BEGINS ON PAGE A8

Manufacturing careers boom

As Worcester continues to see economic growth and development, the city's long time industries have been seeking new ways to maintain and contribute to a vibrant local economy. A prime example of this can be found within the manufacturing industry.

With a majority of the city's manufacturing jobs being occupied by older generations, many employers are faced with a new wave of job openings due to the retirement of their primary workforce. Although Worcester County is home to multiple technical and vocational schools, these jobs have not been filling up as quickly

as expected. In response to this, Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Timothy P. Murray, along with David J. Ferreira, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators, and Lewis Finfer, executive director of the Massachusetts Communities Action Network, created the Alliance for Vocational and Technical Education.

With the success of fundraising efforts, the AVTE asked The Kitty and Michael Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University to

SEE MANUFACTURING, PAGE A7

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PUBLIC POLICY

Forum fears impact from Health Care Reform

Secretary Sudders casts concerning voice toward repeal and replace bill

Marylou Sudders, state Secretary of Health & Human Services, told listeners at a recent Business & Government Forum that health care is an “extraordinary economic engine” for Massachusetts with about one in 10 jobs now associated with that industry.

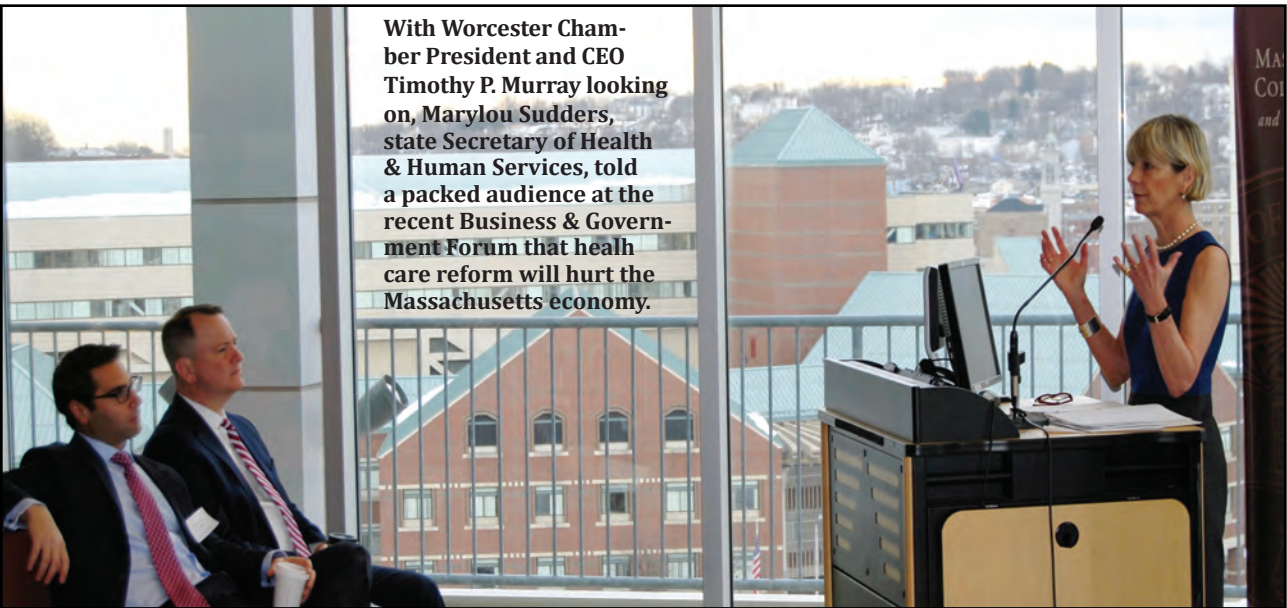
The quarterly Worcester Regional Chamber Business & Government Forum sponsored by Fallon Health and Ventry Associates was held on MCPHS’s 9th floor in March 2017. The morning session featured Sudders and UMass Memorial Health Care President and CEO Eric Dickson in an audience packed room offering panoramic views overlooking the expanding downtown development landscape.

Speaking just prior to the first decision by U.S. Congress not to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, Sudders spoke often with “irreverent” language to describe the still lingering possibility of Republican-driven change to the current \$19.77 billion health care system in Massachusetts.

“Think about Worcester and the surrounding area and how much of it is health care-related,” says Sudders. “Then extend it out when you think of Boys and Girls Clubs, social services, and children and family programs. Health care coverage is a right and Massachusetts coverage has a long history of bipartisanship.”

The 2006 Massachusetts Healthcare Reform Act that currently occupies 40 percent of the state budget was used by former President Obama’s Administration in 2010 as a blueprint for the nation’s Affordable Care Act. Sudders said authors of the original first-in-nation state law here knew it would be complex and must be tackled as separate issues.

“We have the greatest [health care] coverage



With Worcester Chamber President and CEO Timothy P. Murray looking on, Marylou Sudders, state Secretary of Health & Human Services, told a packed audience at the recent Business & Government Forum that health care reform will hurt the Massachusetts economy.

of citizens in the United States at just about 97 percent,” says Sudders. “Coverage is a good base to start from, but we then understood we had to tackle affordability and availability. When you pass something, it doesn’t mean you stop thinking about it, tinkering with it and revising it. We have tinkered with our coverage bill at least three times.”

Unlike the law’s ongoing review in Massachusetts, the nation’s Affordable Care Act has never once been revised. “For anyone who thinks it passed once so it should not be revised, that’s really not good governance,” says Sudders. “Seven years later and now we’re going to repeal and not first think about what we are going to revise, fix or improve upon; this is what we have at this moment.”

MEDICAID EXPANSION WOES

Often the focus on Medicaid casts the system into a national spotlight, but Sudders says there are 50 different Medicaid programs in 50 different states right now. “When you’ve seen one state’s Medicaid program, you’ve seen one state’s Medicaid program.

This is a federal-state share program and we now have 300,000 people [in Massachusetts] on Medicaid as a result of that expansion.”

Sudders adds that there’s currently 1.9 million residents on Medicaid’s Health Insurance Plus program, and another 252,000 residents on the Connector who have subsidies as a result of the Affordable Care Act – 190,000 of whom qualify through cost sharing subsidies or advanced premium tax credits.

Today, Medicaid applicants have to only be considered low income or earning an annual salary of \$16,383. This is the big change for Medicaid with state expansion, Sudders says, which previously allowed residents to apply on the basis of income and other qualifying conditions.

“So we have at-risk just under a half a million people in a Commonwealth of 6.6 million who are at risk of losing health coverage [if the Republican’s repeal and replace measures passes],” Sudders says.

Medicaid is also a revenue producer for Massachusetts. Of the \$37 billion in revenue that comes into the state on average each year, \$11 billion is Medicaid driven.

STATE WOULD FACE DEEP CUTS

What has happened in Massachusetts is reverse osmosis with almost an equal share of 500,000 residents previously on commercial health insurance plans switching over to MassHealth in recent years. It is projected that two million people will enroll in the state’s health care program next year.

Based on the Congressional Budget Office calculus and methodology on the cost of replacing the existing American Care Act, Sudders’ own data analysts projected \$1.3 billion in lost revenues for the state of Massachusetts in Fiscal Year 2020. “It increases to about \$2 billion two years later,” Sudders adds.

The Secretary is quick to call Congress’s now stalled repeal and replace bill regressive, arguing that it eliminates a lot of tax cuts, provides more benefits to people of higher incomes, and targets older adults in two different ways. The bill would have increased private premiums for people over the age of 60 five times that of younger people, and the actuarial value of the benefit decreases.

“You’d be paying more, buying less,” Sudders says.

The existing federal law’s \$20 million allocation to Massachusetts through its Prevention and Wellness Trust Fund, which helps fund the state Department of Public Health and youth service agencies such as the Boys & Girls Club in Worcester, would be cut.

Moreover, the repeal would have eliminated all of the family planning services, not just abortion programs, Sudders says, including contraceptives and counseling among others. The bill also would have changed qualifiers for seniors in need of entering nursing home care.

“As I kept reading, I kept looking for what’s good for us,” Sudders says, who breathed a collective sigh of relief when not enough GOP Senate support was found to pass the repeal. “With removal of the employer mandate, there would be even more people without employer-sponsored insurance.”

UMass Memorial CEO believes better coordination among patients with multiple problems key to fixing health care

He makes no qualms about it. Worcester and Massachusetts have the best rescue care system in the nation, according to UMass Memorial Health Care President and CEO Eric Dickson.

“If you get in a bad car accident, get a stroke or have a heart attack then Worcester is the best place to be,” Dickson told listeners at the Worcester Regional Chamber’s March 2017 Business & Government Forum. “We have stroke patients now who lose the ability to speak or entire movement of side. We send them up to angioplasty so they can do a catheter, which will grow up through the leg and snatch that clot away. You’ll watch them recover right before your eyes. It’s absolutely amazing.”

Dickson adds that the flipside to that success story are other patients in that same emergency department with the same problem that don’t receive that level of care. “We don’t have a great preventative health care system in this country or in this state,” Dickson says. “If you

don’t want to have that stroke or heart attack, then you should move to Canada, France or Japan because you’re much more likely to have that prevented in those countries.”

The fundamental problem with the current health care system, Dickson believes, is not being able to effectively treat and cure patients experiencing multiple problems spread across multiple providers and several sites of care. The frustrating fact for Dickson is that the United States spends twice as much on health care as any other industrialized nation.

“That squeezes out everything else we want to spend money on. K-12 education, infrastructure investments, libraries and the arts; there’s no money left for that. We all need to come together to help bring the cost of health care down.”

The system that defines how health care was created is what needs to be fixed, Dickson says. How to manage care from a regional level and how and where those health care dollars will be spent is paramount to future reform efforts. “Are we going to spend it on doubling our MRI



UMass Memorial Health Care President and CEO Erik Dickson takes a question from the audience.

capacity or care for recovery?,” asks Dickson.

A staggering 5 percent of patients utilize 50 percent of the health care resources in the United States and it applies to all commercial, Medicare and Medicaid populations. For the 95 percent that use up the other resources, Dickson adds, the system works just fine.

“If you’re in that 5 percent with multiple problems that requires multiple coordination, you’re unhappy with health care,” says Dickson. “That’s why we don’t see the changes that we need.”

PUBLIC POLICY

Worcester's JetBlue Airways spreads its wings to NYC

Worcester Regional Airport is expanding once again with JetBlue Airway’s plans to add flight service from Worcester to New York City’s JFK Airport.

The new flights will begin as soon as Worcester Airport’s owner Massport completes a new state-of-the-art \$30 million Category III instrument landing system. That FAA-operated system will allow for the long sought ability to land aircraft in low visibility conditions.

In making the announcement at Worcester Airport on Feb. 28, JetBlue Director of Airports Scott Link says his company has a long flight path in Worcester dating back to 2004, while crediting low fares and strong customer service as the core ingredients for continued growth. The service will feature the Embraer 190 Aircraft that can accommodate up to 100 passengers in two-by-two layout rows with full in-air amenities.

Link adds the new airport enhancements will pave the way for additional service, with the non-stop NYC flights expected to make daily trips, accessing more than 70 airlines that operate out of JFK. New York City is JetBlue’s largest focus city, with the carrier offering up to 175 daily national and international departures.

Timothy P. Murray, president and CEO of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, led efforts as lieutenant governor to have Massport acquire the regional airport. He calls the announcement another major milestone for the city, citing a recent Department of Transportation economic impact study that found the airport has contributed \$46.4 million to the regional economy.

“If you study regions that are vibrant and growing, it’s because their transportation systems are functional and dependable, and create linkages of contacts to other regions,” says Murray, adding that Massport has been a steadfast and committed partner. “When you have a company like JetBlue that comes here, it sends a signal and adds opportunities for our economy to grow further.”

Another long-time local airport champion, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, spoke at JetBlue’s announcement



State and regional leaders including (left to right): MassPort Director of Aviation Ed Freni, Rabbi Fogelman, Worcester County Sheriff Lew Evangelidis, MassPort CEO Tom Glynn, Kathleen Polanowicz with Congressman McGovern's office, MassPort Airport Director Andy Davis, JetBlue Director of Airports Scott Links, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, and Worcester Regional Chamber President and CEO Timothy P. Murray, celebrate the expanded JetBlue Airways to New York City announcement.

along with City Manager Edward Augustus, Worcester County Sheriff Lew Evangelidis, Massport CEO Thomas Glynn, and Massport Chairman Michael Angelini. Polito cited a February 2017 ranking by *US News & World Report* that lists Massachusetts as the number one state in the country to live.

“More people are earning a good living here in

the Commonwealth,” says Polito. “This took a lot of planning and follow through and bi-partisan leadership.”

The Worcester Regional Airport first opened in 1946 and has been providing commercial aviation services for more than 70 years. Follow them on Twitter @FlyWorcester for updates on when service to NYC will begin.

PUBLIC POLICY BRIEFS

Chamber signs on as first MBAE affiliate

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce has signed on with the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) as its first business affiliate signaling a core commitment to driving education improvements that will ensure all students get the education they need to be successful in their college life and career.

The Springfield Regional Chamber of Commerce, Boston Chamber of Commerce, Springfield Business Leaders for Education, Newton-Needham Regional Chamber of Commerce, Concord Chamber of Commerce, and TechNet have also joined the network.

Groups are responding to their members’ concerns on education and the workforce expressed through a recent statewide employer survey. 72% of Massachusetts employers say the schools need major or moderate change. Employers believe that there is much room for improvement in preparing youth for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. Inequities in education that leave far too many students on the economic sidelines and a widening skills gap that makes it difficult for employers to find qualified candidates to fill positions, must be addressed.

Worcester gets highest-ever bond rating from Fitch

City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. announced last winter that Worcester has received its highest-ever municipal bond rating from Fitch Ratings, a global independent credit rating agency.

The agency upgraded the city's municipal bond rating to AA, up from AA-.

The city of Worcester is rated annually by three independent rating agencies. In addition to the Fitch Ratings AA (stable) rating, Moody’s Investors Service and Standard and Poor’s Rating Service have reaffirmed the city’s strong ratings of Aa3 (stable) and AA- (stable), respectively.

Private sector investors depend on the agencies' ratings and reports of the city’s fiscal health when investing by purchasing bonds. Higher ratings mean lower borrowing costs. An upgrade can potentially save taxpayers millions when the city uses bonds to pay for schools, roads and other infrastructure and capital projects.

Revamped City Common events scheduled

With construction cranes filling the skyline, and new businesses opening weekly, downtown Worcester is in the

midst of a transformation, and the city of Worcester is looking to make the Worcester Common the hub of it all.

City Manager Edward M. Augustus, Jr. has challenged his staff and the community to make 2017 the biggest year on the Common yet. So the city of Worcester has launched #Worcester100, a campaign to bring 100 events to the area of the Common this year.

Plenty of events are already planned, including the popular Out to Lunch Concert Series, a weekly farmers market, yoga on the Common, and the 6th Annual Worcester Food Truck & Craft Beer Festival, which will move downtown from Elm Park this year. More events are being added every week. For a listing of upcoming events, visit WorcesterCommonOval.com.

Urban Revitalization Plan receives state approval

The city of Worcester’s Urban Revitalization Plan has been approved by the state Department of Housing & Community Development, City Manager Edward M. Augustus, Jr. recently announced.

“This plan sets an ambitious roadmap for the future of downtown Worcester, ramping up an already growing sense of momentum and vitality in our city’s core,” says City Manager Augustus. “The state’s approval validates our vision

for a safe and vibrant downtown with strong economic and cultural assets.”

Chamber of Commerce joins NE Coalition for Affordable Energy

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce recently joined the New England Coalition for Affordable Energy, a regional group advocating for an all-resource strategy. Sources of energy include pipelines, wind turbines, gas-fired power plants, and hydropower. The strategy aims to reduce the rapidly rising energy costs in New England and address the impending shortage of energy infrastructure in the region.

New England has the highest energy costs in the continental United States, a distinction increasingly driven by inadequate energy infrastructure. Residents pay 58% higher and industries pay 80% higher. According to a 2016 report, if no new infrastructure is developed in New England by 2020, energy costs could increase by \$5.4 billion, resulting in even higher costs.

The Chamber joined the Coalition because it knows that energy costs are critical to members. Individual businesses are welcome to join as well. If you're interested in learning more about the Coalition, contact info@neaffordableenergy.org.

SMALL BUSINESS PROFILE

Creedon hits homeruns for family business

From his early days as a successful lawyer who returned to lead the family catering and tent rental business to national acclaim, John W.S. Creedon, Jr. has dodged plenty of curve balls in his career, culminating in ownership of a successful minor league baseball team.

Officially founded in 1985, Creedon and Co., Inc.'s first home dates back to the steady and hard-working leadership of his father John W.S. Creedon running a small diner on the bottom floor of a triple-decker in Quinsigamond Village. "My dad was earning more money as a senior in high school making pizza than his economics teacher was," Creedon recalls at the May 10 Woostapreneurs event at Worcester State University where he was keynote speaker.. "Sleep was never a priority. My dad opened the greasy spoon diner and built up a steady following."

Soon, his dad was earning enough to expand the diner into catering. As that operation grew, and requests for tents, tables, chairs and other equipment increased, so did the need for additional space.

In 1998, the company moved to 39 Jolma Road. The new facility, after an additional expansion in 2008, now consists of approximately 24,000-square-feet of warehouse space, 3,000-square-feet of kitchen space and 2,600-square-feet of office space.

Today, the Creedon empire, which has grown from 30 to 160 employees



John W.S. Creedon, Jr. speaks at the May 10 Woostapreneurs event at Worcester State University.

and includes daughter and sister Julie, has a thriving catering, events and tent rental business. The company was first to offer customers one of the largest tents in the country - a structure stretching three football fields in length that was quickly rented across the US and even in Key West.

After passing the bar and practicing law at Fletcher Tilton PC for a few years, Creedon traded in his wing tips and golf clubs for boots and sledgehammers and returned to the family business. Here, he learned the valuable business lesson of leveraging word-of-mouth relationships.

He grew the business by helping MEMA with disaster relief efforts, and

his company rented a tent to the now defunct Worcester Tornadoes, later providing food and concessions for the struggling team back in 2005.

After the Tornadoes folded, Creedon seized the opportunity to bring baseball back to Worcester and began researching how to bring a summer collegiate team to the city at today's Hanover Park at Holy Cross College at a fraction of the cost traditional minor league teams cost.

"I had to overcome the perception that the collegiate league was inferior to the minor league franchise," says Creedon, who also beat thyroid cancer during this same time.

In 2013, Holy Cross College came

to the table with an offer to lease its Fitton Field stadium to Creedon, and he was to able to start a franchise as the Worcester Bravehearts playing in the Futures Collegiate Baseball League.

Four years later, The Bravehearts sit among the top 10 Futures teams in the country for attendance, won two consecutive championships, and have hosted many players who eventually moved on to the majors. The Bravehearts offer 28 home games, 28 concession stands, and more than 1,000 people per night in the stands.

"It's been a labor of love seeing local kids rooting for the Bravehearts," says Creedon, acknowledging that the hard work has only begun for his teams. "We're trying to make the field the premier outdoor summer destination in Worcester. We've gone from the ham and cheese game to a people's game."

And the company's expansion into baseball has been a hit for the traditional catering business as well.

Creedon sums up this whirlwind business expansion by drawing upon his younger days as a lawyer.

"I'd acknowledge that I was not the best lawyer in the world, but on that particular day for that particular case, client and court, I was the best prepared lawyer to try that case."

He adds that as a former high school rowing athlete, he always strived for the perfect race but never achieved it. "We just had to be better that day than the other boats on the water."

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Chamber announces 2017 award recipients

The Chamber's annual awards presentation takes place each May, before that month's Business After Hours, to recognize members for their outstanding business activities and historic building restorations. The Chamber's mission: Recruit, Retain, Incubate, would not be possible without a strong and vibrant business community. It is these hard-working women and men who make that happen. They get up every day, face whatever lies ahead, and work to provide jobs, services, products, and a great place in which to live and work. The Chamber is proud to recognize them at this event.

L-R: Nigel Belgrave, PuroClean - Entrepreneur of the Year; Chris Crowley, acting chair of the Chamber's board of directors; Robert and Brian, Barrows Hardware - Joe Cohen Retailer of

the Year; Harry Kokkinis, Table Talk Pies - Richard B. Kennedy Business of the Year; Jay Evangelista, Dino's Ristorante - Family Owned Business of the Year; Dr. Marianne Felice and Dr. Ivan Green, board members, Hanover Theatre Conservatory, Silver Hammer Award; Carla Smith, Fallon Health - Ambassador of the Year; Michael Kearns, VP Construction for MG2, Bancroft on the Grid - Silver Hammer Award; Karen DiVerdi, Enchanted Fireside - Small Business of the Year; Robert Branca, Owner Branded Realty/Branded Management, 72 Shrewsbury Street - Silver Hammer Award; Timothy P. Murray, president and CEO, WRCC; not pictured: Brian Thompson, Commerce Bank - Chamber Advocate of the Year.

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MANUFACTURING, FROM PAGE A1

conduct a study to analyze how vocational school “administrators, students, graduates, employers, and parents, and the public at large view the current state of vocational education in the Commonwealth and how it could be strengthened.”

According to this report, several key factors have contributed to the hindrance of the vocational workforce pipeline. One main contributor is the over enrollment of these schools which results in long wait lists of potential students. Due to the high reputation and competitive nature of Massachusetts vocational schools, 16 percent of current students did not get into their preferred program.

In an effort to address this issue, the city of Worcester applied for and was awarded a Career and Technical Education Partnership Grant in the amount of \$10,000. The grant was used to begin planning and developing new strategies to place more students in vocational education. This led to the creation of WIN-WIN. The planning process for WIN-WIN (What I Need/What Industry Needs) was a collaborative effort of the Worcester Public Schools (WPS), the workforce investment system Central Mass Workforce Investment Board (CMWIB) and regional economic development agencies, including the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, to prepare youth and young adults for skilled careers in manufacturing, says Gregg Bares, manager of grant resources at Worcester Public Schools.

On Jan. 31, 2017, Worcester was awarded \$122,500 to begin implementing this project. This was one of only seven awarded in the state.



Worcester Public Schools Superintendent Maureen Binienda wants to bring manufacturing training and jobs to her students.

Both of these grants were provided with Federal Perkins Funds.

With the help of this grant, Worcester Public Schools and its partners have begun implementing strategies to provide educational opportunities to students who would normally not have access to them.

“The Worcester Public Schools have been working very strategically around the area of manufacturing,” says WPS Superintendent Maureen Binienda. “We realize there are a lot of job openings... and we have the students. We’re trying to figure out how to help students get the training so they can get the jobs. That’s the end game for education...we train students so they can get good jobs and have good lives for themselves and their families.”

The main strategy being carried out is to increase school hours of operation in order to cater to the high demand of students looking for a vocational education. “We really want to expand the Worcester Tech program so that it goes 16 hours a day. The plan is twofold. One is that around 60 kids from the comprehensives would be able to go in the afternoon from three to six...and the other is to partner with our adult education program...and once they pass the GED, we can also train them in manufacturing because there is a great need,” says Binienda. “This training will prepare them for placement in the manufacturing sector and in jobs that pay a living wage and hold the promise of a lifelong career,” agreed Bares.

As of now, this plan is in a trial

stage. Right WPS has 15 students from the Gerald Creamer Center, which is a program for over age, under credited students. Those students are now partnered with Worcester Tech learning machinery and they are going to Primetals for that work. The plan is for internships after that and job placements.

Another conclusion drawn by the Northeastern study shows that even though Massachusetts vocational schools cannot meet demand under current funding conditions, there is even more demand that remains untapped. The study also suggests that better marketing strategies may need to be implemented in order to reach more potential students and their parents.

“Manufacturing is a huge employer in Central Massachusetts. It’s critically important that we make sure parents and young people understand the meaningful careers they can have in manufacturing,” says Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Timothy P. Murray. “There’s opportunity to earn and learn, work in innovative places, make things that transform lives, sectors of the economy, and communities.”

Although Worcester is steadily evolving into a modern city with new and diverse businesses, the native manufacturing industry is working to retain its workforce and economic role in the city. With the help of this grant, Worcester Public Schools will be able to provide students with increased learning opportunities and a clear path to success.

“It’s imperative that we develop skill levels of prospective employees so they can fill those jobs,” says Murray.

- Zaven Donoian

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CitySquare, Mercantile Center

A significant component of downtown Worcester's redevelopment is Franklin Realty Advisors' Mercantile Center, which is replacing much of the former Worcester Center Galleria mall. Core elements of that cornerstone project have already been finished while phase two will involve renovating the remaining vacant space in both towers into Class A office space.

There is approximately 71,000-square-feet of vacant space left in the nine-story office tower at 120 Front St., and 112,000-square-feet of vacant space in the 100 Front St. tower. An additional

"One of the Chamber's priorities is promoting and supporting economic development in all parts of the city. That role means wearing many different hats and includes many different activities - one of which is being at the table to facilitate introductions, partnerships, and seizing opportunities as they arise."

- Timothy P. Murray

*President and CEO
Worcester Regional
Chamber of Commerce*

25,000-square-feet is also still being earmarked for the anticipated return of the Foothills Theater.

Franklin Realty President Charles F. Norton, Jr. says the theater has attracted some interest, but it will probably be one of the final phases of the total development footprint. Foothills Theater would have an entrance in the plaza at 100 Front St. with the majority of it sitting below ground.

Within two years, Norton envisions that the restaurant and entertainment end of Mercantile Center will also be at capacity. Early plans call for at least 50,000-square-feet of retail development opportunity, and two local restaurant developers have already expressed interest.

"Food and entertainment go hand and hand and more is sometimes better than less," Norton says. "We think there is a substantial pent up demand. The more hotels and apartments are built downtown, the more that will stimulate the after 9-5 activity."

Mercantile Center's first phase now sports a \$39 million building redevelopment that attracted UMass Memorial Health Care, which will eventually occupy 75,000-square-feet of space with about 500 employees in the refurbished 20-story office tower at 100 Front St. UMass is moving over in phases this year.

Additionally, a \$5 million, 1,647-space garage was completed on Commercial Street last year to better accommodate new workers as well as patrons and future DCU Center events.

"We expect at development for that garage to be fully utilized," says Norton, adding that most office leases in Worcester include parking as part of the rent whereas in a city like Boston parking is mostly separate from the rent. Retailers are also very sensitive to the availability of parking and cost for their patrons, adding to the challenge. "The world is changing and these garages are expensive to fix and maintain."

Assuming Mercantile Center attracts primarily food-related businesses in its next



development phase, Norton foresees the garage working out well as the typical lunch crowd is already on site as employees or visitors. And at night and weekends when the offices are closed, there will be plenty of parking available for public use and DCU Center events.

"We think the two uses are very compatible [for parking]," he adds. "We want to be considered one of the prime parking areas for DCU events. We see that as a very important component of our project."

Once the total project is finished, Norton expects about 1,800-2,000 employees to



237 apartment

Roseland Residential Trust, a wholly owned subsidiary of Mack-Cali Realty Corporation (NYSE: CLI), is steadily progressing in its quest to complete construction on upscale apartment homes at 145 Front St. in Worcester.

The \$90 million CitySquare core project now under construction will be built in two phases. When complete, it will comprise 365 apartment homes, with phase one completion expected this fall to include 237 apartment homes. It is a key component of the master-planned, mixed-use development that is revitalizing the city's downtown.

The luxury residential community will feature studio, one and two-bedroom units, with a wide range of state-of-the-art amenities, including an outdoor swimming pool with a sundeck, a courtyard with fire pit, barbecue grills, a dog run, and more.

The building will also feature a concierge, a fitness center, yoga and spinning studios, a billiards room, and a game room. The total space will be 12,000 square feet.

"This development is a vision in luxury living in downtown Worcester. It offers a new set of amenities and a lifestyle," says the president and chief executive officer of Roseland Residential Trust. "The entire development is the quintessential urban environment, and it's a part of it."

This property is expected to be attractive to Worcester residents and visitors in advanced markets.

DEVELOPMENT

Center primed for next phases



AC Marriott set to open in Spring 2018



As a major springboard to fill new projected retail and restaurants in the heart of downtown Worcester, XSS Hotels collaborated with the Manchester, NH based PROCON, who is the designer and construction manager for the \$33 million, 117,000-square-foot upscale, six-story AC Hotel by Marriott now under construction at 125 Front St.

As part of CitySquare, plans call for 170 king suites and double-queen guest rooms to be located on floors two through six of the building with upscale decor and large corporate meeting spaces.

The European-inspired hotel will offer a robust package of guest-friendly amenities. The design concept includes a fitness center, a yoga room, a 24/7 market, conference center and meeting rooms and a business center.

Expansive public spaces will feature a bar and lounge area that flows to an outdoor terrace. Additionally, the 7,100-square-foot function room will include an in-house full-service restaurant with

an outdoor patio seating area.

Worcester Mayor Joseph M. Petty says the “CitySquare development and this hotel are at the heart of our plan for revitalizing our city’s core. Even before the construction began, we started seeing the positive impact with new restaurants and businesses opening around our downtown.”

The AC Hotel sits atop the city’s recently opened 586-car underground parking garage that will service the hotel and surrounding buildings. Work began on the site last October and the building was weathertight by February 2017. Construction is expected to be completed by Spring 2018.

To develop the property, XSS Hotels is tapping into the Tax Increment Financing option offered by the city to spur economic development by private entities.

While the agreement with the city of Worcester will reduce the hotel’s tax payments to the city over a 10-year period, an estimated \$4 million will be added to tax rolls.

be scattered among his various leased spaces, with the potential for an additional 200-300 employees in retail developments.

For Norton, the opportunity to develop such a massive project is historic. “We’re honored to work on a really exciting mainstay in downtown Worcester,” Norton says, adding that he feels “a civic responsibility to develop this project correctly, to set the right tone, and see ourselves as the building block for further development. My hats off to all the major players at the chamber and the city manager. We never would have put this deal together without them.”

homes on the rise

will also have a full-time business center with on-demand printing classes, and a clubroom with computers, a lounge area, and a gym. Additionally, there will be 100 feet of ground level retail space.

Development brings a new dimension to the rapidly growing Worcester area – an unrivaled mix of convenience, and a high-quality lifestyle. Says Andrew Marshall, president and operating officer of Roseland Development. “This property and the investment will make Worcester a premier urban live-work-play environment and we are thrilled to be a part of it.”

City is expected to be especially attractive to Worcester’s growing workforce in manufacturing, information

technology, biotechnology, and healthcare.

Roseland’s focus on developing in downtown areas is readily apparent elsewhere in Massachusetts as well. The company is building Portside at East Pier in East Boston where it is redeveloping a stretch of waterfront property on Boston Harbor. Portside at East Pier is composed of 181 apartment homes that are fully occupied, 296 that are currently under construction, and an additional future phase which will likely include a mix of apartment homes, condos, a hotel, and multiple public amenities.

Roseland is also constructing The Chase II at Overlook Ridge five miles north of Boston. Chase II is a 292-apartment home community and part of a master-planned community, currently comprised of 1,400 apartment homes, and approved for a total of approximately 2,800 apartment homes.

Recalling when CitySquare first took root with early 2013 tenants



Until Hanover Insurance as principal financial investor in the 12-acre CitySquare project succeeded Berkeley Investments in 2010, and then hired Leggat McCall Properties to manage the sprawling downtown development potential, the project was unable to attract its first major tenant.

Leggat bolstered the once struggling \$565 million project, and Hanover Insurance built a \$70 million office tower building to host Unum. The 214,000-square-foot building was constructed with mostly recycled materials, and the lobby and top floors were made available for leasing. Unum has a 17-year lease of that property, and adds immediate density to Worcester’s blossoming downtown daytime population.

Additionally, a new \$23 million Saint Vincent Cancer & Wellness Center development was realized once Hanover entered the picture, opening in 2013 on Foster Street. The center occupies three floors and 65,000-square-feet. St. Vincent’s received a 15-year tax-increment financing deal from the city to enable the agreement. Saint Vincent will be exempt from paying \$9.7 million in real estate and personal property taxes over the 15-year life of the deal. During the same period, the hospital will pay the city an additional \$3.2 million in taxes.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Upscale apartment-retail mix unfolds at The Grid

The unrealized potential of a six-acre prime redevelopment project with high and low rise buildings situated in the heart of downtown would make some question why it remained vacant for so many years before the arrival of John McGrail, president and CEO of MG2. Twelve years ago, McGrail found this “overlooked opportunity” and is turning it into a gem as the largest concentrated mix of upscale apartments, diverse restaurants, a coffee house, an outdoor beer garden and retail storefronts in the history of downtown Worcester.

The massive development titled “The Grid District” situated within the city’s Theater District spans several city blocks from the backside of Hanover Theatre all the way to the Worcester Public Library, and runs adjacent to the green space of the Worcester Common. MG2 has already invested more than \$30 million in transforming an assemblage of eight buildings into a vibrant urban community with several major portions of the project already opened for business.

“You’re going to want to live here,” says MG2 Vice President Joseph Donovan. “Whether a student or a young professional lives here, this is the epicenter of what is going on downtown.”

Targeting both college students and professionals, MG2 hopes to capitalize upon this growing downtown development boom, including MCPHS University and new bio-tech firms, which have been expanding their own downtown footprint over the past several years. Donovan said monthly rental costs ranging from a \$875 studio to a rarer \$3,600 five-bedroom unit are priced competitively in order to establish a base and move MG2’s plans forward.

Intensive renovation work with as many as 75 construction workers on site daily last fall is paying off. Many renovated units at The Grid’s signature 260,000-square-foot building, Bancroft on the Grid, located at 50 Franklin St., are now complete, with the grand lobby and second floor expected to fully open on June 1. Newly installed white marble flooring, columns, comfortable open seating areas, secured elevators, and a 24-hour staffed concierge desk greet residents and visitors.

Adding to the refurbished stylings of this hotel is a 24-hour fitness center with the latest equipment that comes complimentary as part of the rental agreement. Parking is available as well as laundry rooms, free Wi-Fi in the common areas and communal work areas for residents.

“We have also added Doorbell.me to coordinate resident events on a weekly basis to our community. A resident can reach out as well to a fellow resident to inquire about borrowing a cup of sugar through our resident app,” says MG2 Director of Operations Steve Carter.

Upstairs at the Bancroft, new residents are discovering the 600 to 1,120 square-foot studio, and one-, two-, and three-bedroom units offering wide spanning views of the downtown area with kitchenettes, fully renovated bathrooms, large bedroom, and cozy, bright living areas with unique wall artwork. Carter



The Grid’s signature Bancroft Building is nearly complete and the developer plans to convert the former Paris Cinema into an outdoor beer garden. Below is the newly opened lobby of the Bancroft.

says the units differ in color arrays and furnishings to avoid a homogenized appearance to attract both professionals and college students. Hallways are painted in a soft medium gray with white treatments and comfortable carpeting.

“We’re trying to make all the buildings a little different from each other, and give them all different personalities,” adds Carter, who has also helped shape the overall look and feel of the buildings.

Two of The Grid’s buildings are also among the most treasured historic properties in all of Worcester. Both the 100,000-square-foot Park Plaza Building at 507 Main St. and the Bancroft each towering above eight stories were originally inspired by the Beaux Arts City Beautiful Movement at the turn of the century. The buildings received window replacements, re-pointing of the brick façades, renovation of ornamental stonework, and first floor retail storefront restorations back to historic conditions. The Bancroft and Park Plaza draw upon more classic design aesthetics while the remaining structures offer either modern or industrial stylings. Bancroft on the Grid was the recent recipient of the Chamber’s prestigious Silver Hammer Award that recognizes redevelopment and renovation of historically significant buildings that brings buildings back to life with renewed use and restoration.

NEW RESTAURANTS PLANNED

In the next phases, MG2 will focus on delivering additional restaurants and finalizing renovations to Park Plaza on The Grid. All told, the eight buildings in MG2’s portfolio comprise 538 residential units in addition to 60,000-square-feet of retail space, and the potential to develop up to 350,000 additional square feet.

In addition to these buildings’ transformations, two of six planned eating and drinking establishments recently opened on The Grid last year with “The Brew on The Grid” and “Techni” both operated by former Starbucks executive Frank Peace, Jr., now owner of New England Craft Restaurant Concepts.

The Brew on the Grid opened in August 2016 and is the perfect meeting place for trendy millennial meets professional with music, Wi-Fi and streetscape views. The expansive menu offers nine types of gourmet and regular coffees, an \$18,000 espresso machine, keg-chilled coffee, four super juices, craft sandwiches including vegan options and salads made fresh locally as well as pastries and liquor. No cup of joe served at The Brew will be more than one hour old. Peace hopes this coffee house serves as the model for other similar MG2 developments outside of Worcester.

“This was really meant to take the artisanal approach towards coffee,” Peace says. “National chain brands have gone to more automation, and modified their sizes and contents, and it really has diluted how great coffee is. I decided I wanted to be very consistent with coffee.”

Peace notes that his Techni restaurant that opened in October 2016 is different from any other downtown restaurant. It offers a Mediterranean grill with falafel, kabobs, sandwiches, salads, and Greek bowls in a fast, casual Chipotle-type dining experience. “You are able to come in and select all of your fresh ingredients with a quick in and out,” Peace says. “It provides an outlet for to-go ordering as well.”

Both The Grid residents and public will soon begin to see the restaurant end of MG2’s vision fully unfold. Two side-by-side restaurants with a dual kitchen called “Pie and Pint” and “Craft Table and Bar” as well as “Comedy on the Grid” will be accessible from street level and interior resident elevators.

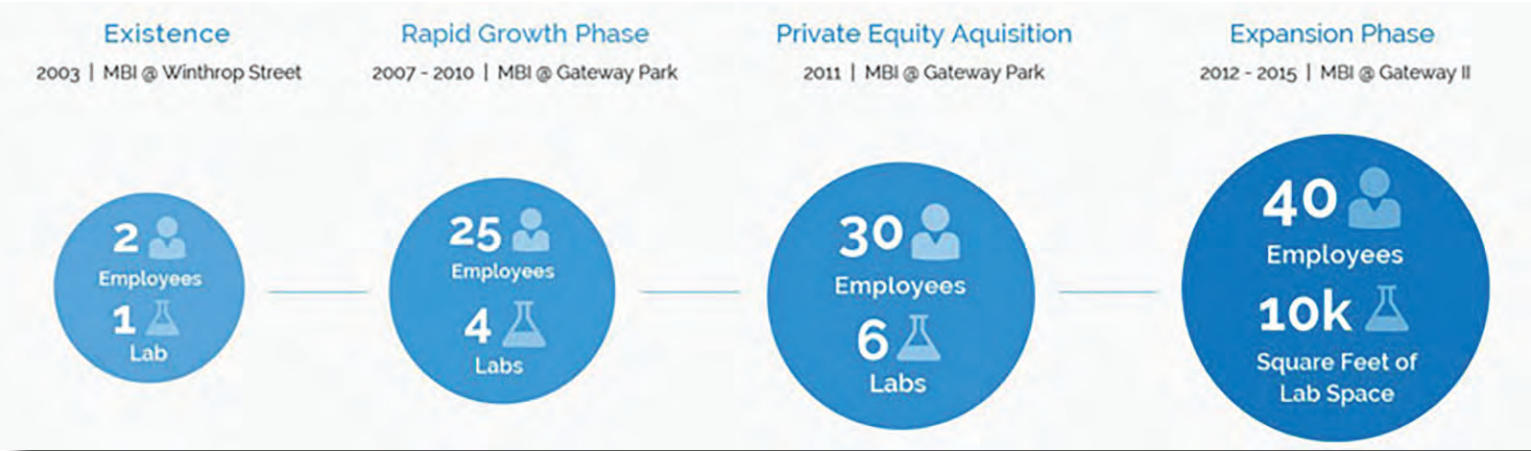
“On one side will be this electric, colorful bar with over 50 craft beers on tap where millennials can get a pizza with fresh hand-crafted dough and local ingredients made in under three minutes. Or you can sit out back and have the casual dining experience and be waited on by a server,” says Peace. “We are creating a complete entertainment experience on The Grid.”

Additionally, Peace is planning a major café and outdoor beer garden at the site of the former Paris Cinema, once demolished. The space will feature both indoor and outdoor seating. Peace hopes to see that 25,000-square-foot venue open in July of this year. “The beer garden will become the crown jewel for Worcester,” Peace says. “This will be an outdoor, comfortable, hip place. We plan to have tribute bands in there and movies.”

And finally, “The End: Eatery and Drinkery,” a high end farm-to-table restaurant with a rotating brunch menu, is also slated to open next year. Peace calls it the perfect middle ground for people going out to the theater or DCU Center, and will be open seven days per week.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



MBI advances biomedical incubator market

What began as a long-time dream of former Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President William Short and Massachusetts BioMedical Initiative (MBI) President and CEO Kevin O’Sullivan has become a major nation-wide life sciences hub with a \$550 million economic impact between 2000 and 2015.

In 1987, MBI formed a venture capital arm, Commonwealth BioVentures, that invested more than \$8 million of public money and \$50 million of private money in new technology driven companies. That focus changed to incubation in the late 1990s. Current Worcester Regional Chamber President and CEO Timothy P. Murray spearheaded grassroots efforts as former lieutenant governor under the Deval Patrick Administration to secure support for a Life Sciences Bill.

The true litmus test of MBI’s success arrived in 2002 when two executives from Pfizer Research Technology Center in Boston contacted O’Sullivan about starting a company after re-searching the Worcester market potential. They were interested in outsourcing services to save money and had an idea to develop protein synthesis, which is one of the most fundamental biological processes by which individual cells build their specific proteins. That early vision with just three employees here began what today is MBI’s most successful anchor tenant with 65 employees, Blue Sky Bio-Services, which merged with the large corporation Lake Pharma in 2016.

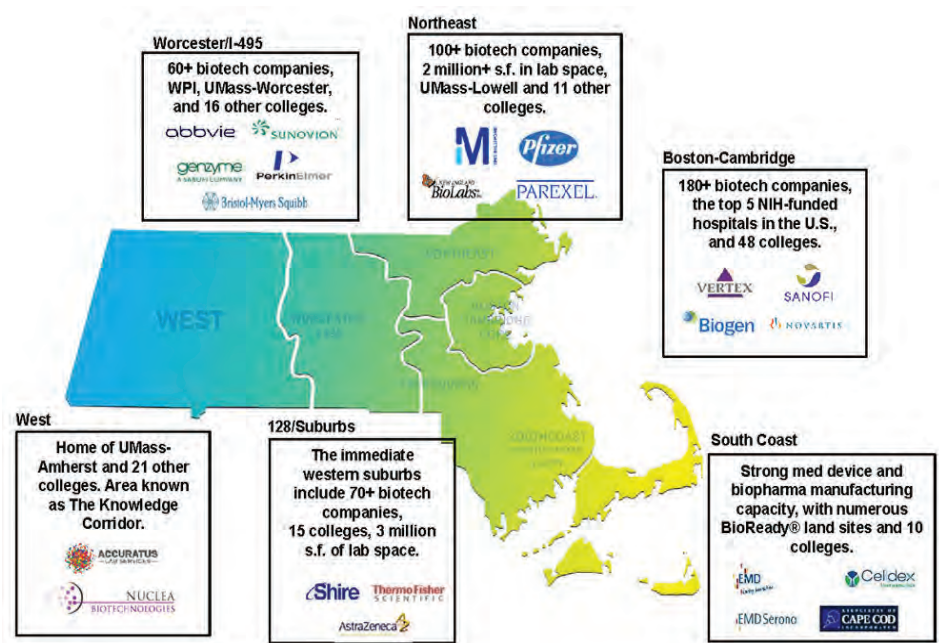
“For the longest time, biopharma kept everything in-house,” says O’Sullivan, “with fears of patent protection. All of a sudden, they saw the merits of outsourcing to get projects done quicker, cheaper and improve quality. At MBI, we don’t create businesses. We help provide the support systems.”

As an example, O’Sullivan says Lake Pharma located here because of commuting ease to Boston, and quality of life as well as good housing in and around the city. Worcester’s attractive labs, students, research professor pool, and future worker base within the region’s 12 colleges and universities are other prime reasons. MBI works closely with WPI’s Biomufacturing Center, Quinsigamond Community College’s workforce training program, and Worcester Technical High School.

Taking a regional and statewide approach to shared cooperation, O’Sullivan believes life sciences in Worcester and Massachusetts are quickly becoming an international focus for investors and buyers similar to their equivalents in the Bay area of San



Blue Sky Biotech was acquired by Lake Pharma in 2016 and is thriving at MBI.



Francisco. He sees a strong biomedical corridor emerging between Lexington, MetroWest towns and Worcester. Between 2000 and 2010, the professional, scientific and technical sector grew by a third accounting for 3,498 new jobs in and around Worcester. The top area with the most growth is research and development, which grew by 40 percent. This sector thrives on clusters, which exist and are growing in Worcester thanks to the region’s unique resources such as UMass Medical School, MBI, and WPI at Gateway Park, which hosts the area’s most concentrated mix of early stage science and engineering companies in the country.

At MBI’s three different campus

facilities in and around Prescott Court, 75 percent of small firms who have incubated their businesses there end up moving on to expand elsewhere to become even more successful, O’Sullivan says. MBI now incubates 33 different start-up firms, averaging 25-30 companies employing 120 workers annually. MBI was 98 percent full with tenants last year, with many new firms coming from the Boston area. O’Sullivan adds that the shelf-life of firms at MBI is typically 24-30 months, and any lab space vacancies are short-lived.

The majority of MBI’s funding comes from charging rent, but state funding also kicks in about \$250,000 annually for shared equipment ser-

vices and upkeep. Each new tenant is required to sign a one-year lease and demonstrate their funding sources. Since the year 2000, MBI has helped to create more than 100 companies and over 550 jobs – the majority of which remain in Massachusetts and Worcester County. It is estimated that, since inception, MBI has assisted more than 150 companies and created 2,500 jobs.

“We are all about providing the structure and the home of science labs,” says O’Sullivan. “When it’s time to go, everybody knows it. Hopefully, when they move on they stay in Central Mass.”

Old State Hospital land being converted

MBI’s expansion has only begun. Driven by the vision of the Economic Development Coordinating Council for a real master plan, Craig Blais and the Worcester Business Development Corporation recently acquired 44 acres of the Old Worcester State Hospital grounds off of Belmont Street to build another innovation center as part of Gov. Baker’s initiative to remove old state properties and sell them.

The site has been vacant since 1991, but would be redeveloped as 500,000-square-feet of biomedical space adding 500 new jobs.

“We hope to be a model for smaller biotech,” says O’Sullivan. “We think there is a real strong market with contract research being outsourced. Our whole intent is to grow that.”

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

150 Blackstone now open at full capacity

Two and a half years ago, GFI Partners - with founding partner Steven Goodman - purchased the U.S. Steel building on Blackstone River Road in the Quinsigamond Village area of Worcester.

Today, GFI Partners' \$26 million redevelopment plan to build a 610,000-square-foot facility known as 150 Blackstone spread over 30 acres has been completed with a state-of-the-art, multi-use industrial building - the type of space that accentuates the potential for major developments outside of the downtown area.

GFI's largest anchor tenant, Imperial Distributors, Inc., will relocate from Auburn and consolidate their operations to this facility with shipping expected to begin in late May. The development also includes Mid-States Packaging Inc., and G3, which is Gallo Wine's distribution group, employing about 50 people. That company began

taking deliveries at 150 Blackstone in early May. Goodman says Imperial's impressive three-story automated conveyor system inside the new warehouse will be up and running and moving product to upwards of 50 loading dock doors in late May as well. Imperial Distributors, Inc. will employ 300 in the new building. During construction, long-time U.S. Steel site tenant, Mid-States Packaging, temporarily moved to a site in Auburn. Goodman says they also are expected to move back in May.

Goodman says the city of Worcester was instrumental in making the project a reality by providing a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Plan that will provide an estimated \$5 million in property tax relief, which allowed his company to perform needed building improvements yet offer competitive lease rates. The city will receive an estimated total

of \$12.4 million in tax revenue during the 15-year TIF Plan.

"It wasn't until we had the TIF that we could attract Imperial," says Goodman, "and we would not have landed the G3 deal. This was about offering a very competitive deal."

Beyond the TIF, Goodman adds that his firm has received "amazing support" from Quinsigamond neighborhood community leaders and local politicians, including City Councilor George Russell and state Rep. Dan Donahue. "The reason we are having so much success is an absolute tribute to the city government here," Goodman adds.

One of the main selling points for GFI Partners during its search for a TIF and tenants is that the Quinsigamond neighborhood offers a robust local workforce to tap as potential future employees. "This type of labor pool is harder and harder to find," Goodman says, "That was a really important factor in getting this warehouse leased."

Founded in 1989, GFI is a full service real estate advisor who has completed more than 100 transactions with a total value of more than \$1 billion. GFI Partners has acquired, developed and managed more than 2.5 million-square-feet of real estate in Worcester.



A recent aerial image of the completed 150 Blackstone commercial/industrial facility that is now fully occupied. The building replaced the former U.S. Steel site.



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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Railers build rink, announce NHL affiliation

In the shadows of a sprawling new team practice and public ice skating facility now rising in the Canal District, Worcester Railers Hockey Club announced in late April that it has reached an affiliation agreement with the New York Islanders of the National Hockey League.

"This was a no brainer. There was instant synergy with the Islanders," Railers Team President Mike Myers says. "They appreciated what we are doing not only as a team, but also as a community and business partner."

Team owner Cliff Rucker and Myers made the revelation at a Chamber business after hours event at Lock 50 restaurant, which is located directly across the street from the Worcester Ice Arena now under construction. Worcester will join the Bridgeport Sound Tigers of the American Hockey League as the primary minor league affiliates for the Islanders organization.

"We are excited to partner with the Worcester Railers Hockey Club as our new ECHL affiliate and bring professional hockey back to an already established hockey city," Islanders President and General Manager Garth Snow says.

Based in Worcester at the DCU Center, the Railers will play its inaugural season in the ECHL's Eastern Conference, starting in October 2017. Founded in 2016, the Railers are the first-ever ECHL franchise to play in Massachusetts. Worcester was pre-



Construction on The Railers new Canal District practice facility and public rink has moved indoors.

viously home to Worcester Warriors from 1954-56 in the now-defunct Eastern Hockey League, the Worcester IceCats (AHL) from 1994-2005 and the Worcester Sharks (AHL) from 2006-2015. The Railers will play its home games at the DCU Center and practice at the Worcester Ice Center. The new affiliation with the Islanders includes integration into their scouting system, strength and conditioning program, and training camps among other things.

Additionally, several Islanders prospects saw time in the ECHL last season, including Matthew Finn, Eamon McAdam, Carter Verhaeghe, Kyle

Schempp and Jesse Graham. Players that finished the 2016-17 season with the Islanders, who spent a portion of their careers in the ECHL, include J.F. Berube, Thomas Greiss, Jaroslav Halak and Alan Quine. In addition, Thomas Greiss and Bracken Kearns both saw significant time in Worcester with the now defunct Worcester Sharks.

Construction on new ice arena moves to interior

Initiated by the Worcester Business Development Corp. in concert with Rucker and Marathon Sports Group,

ground broke on the 100,000-square-foot facility in May 2016 on 3.5 acres of former contaminated land. Plans call for an additional 40,000-square-foot of retail space. Construction is projected to be complete in September 2017.

The Worcester Ice Center features two sheets of ice seating 1,250 total and significant SRO as well, the Railers merchandise and skate center, a family style restaurant, and other retail opportunities. The \$18 million project will also host colleges and universities, including Becker College, Worcester State University, Worcester Academy, Worcester Jr. Railers, and Jr. Crusaders.

Homewood Suites eyes extended stays

First Bristol Corporation President James J. Karam is serious when he says the city's Chief Development Officer Paul Morano gave him the design idea and inspiration during a meeting for the new Homewood Suites.

Set to open in June, Homewood Suites by Hilton offered city leaders and press a recent tour inside the now completed \$21 million six-story, 118-room, all suites hotel specializing in extended stays located in Washington Square across the rotary from Union Station. Moran was in attendance and Karam offered him kudos for his early vision.

"Everybody is talking about Worcester," says Karam. "This city knows what it wants."

Karam adds that the hotel is perfect for longer term stays, offering full services including grocery delivery, dry cleaning, direct MBTA commuter rail, and breakfast. "It's almost like an apartment with a concierge," adds Karam.

The hotel has already hired most of its projected 35 full and part-time workers, and it will be able to provide patrons with a salt water swimming pool, fitness center, and smaller and larger accommodations. Karam ruled out a large convention space or full service restaurant opting instead for small meeting spaces accommodating up to 75 people. Cost for a room per night will average \$139-189 depending upon demand. About 125 parking spaces exist on the premises.

The hotel plans to form partnerships with the booming restaurant corridors along Shrewsbury Street and in the Canal District as well as to capitalize on the city's robust arts community.

Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Timothy P. Murray says with more than 55 new permits issued in the city for restaurants over the past 18 months, Hilton's mar-



First Bristol Corp. President Jim Karam, far right, and Managing Partner Dennis M. Murphy of Ventry Associates LLP, second from right, address the gathered leaders and members of the press on May 10. Below right, construction crews were busy finishing up the punch list items.

keting strategy makes perfect sense. He adds that the hotel will also help attract more conventions to Worcester.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Table Talk keeps snack pie expansion local

Following in his grandfather's footsteps, Harry Kokkinis is expanding the famous Table Talk Pies in his family's native Worcester with a new production facility nearing completion in the South Worcester Industrial Park.

Local real estate developer, Chacharone Properties, is constructing the 51,000-square-foot (SF), one-story building which will feature six loading docks, eight overhead doors and 24-foot ceilings in 45,000 SF of manufacturing space as well as 5,000 SF of office space. The site also includes parking for 75 cars and seven tractor-trailers. With completion expected in July of this year, the facility will utilize a new state-of-the-art air impingement tunnel oven, conveyors and spiral freezer technologies as well as updated packaging equipment that will be installed specifically for Table Talk's signature 4-inch pie.

"The key for us is to have one straight line and on one floor," says Kokkinis. "We love Kelley Square, but it's hard to be a pie maker when you are on multiple floors." The new equipment will also enhance Table Talk's soft-sell products in stores. "They are as good as fresh pies," adds Kokkinis. "This just enables us to increase our shipments across the country. It also frees up production time for other pies in our main plant."

Worcester's beloved Table Talk is now found in hundreds of U.S. supermarkets and shopping centers and is well on its way to dominating the \$1 four-inch snack pie market. Table Talk bakes pies in three sizes: four inch, six inch and 10-inch in nearly a dozen varieties including apple, blueberry and lemon.

Last year, Table Talk Pies sold over 150 million 4-inch pies. With 200 current employees and plans to add up to another 100 in phase 2 second conveyor driven pile line expansion at the new plant, Table Talk Pies stands primed for major expansion. The company also recently added a new retail store selling pies, pastry and coffee on Green Street adjacent to their Canal District facility and was just voted Best Retail Outlet in the city by Worcester Magazine. Kokkinis



Table Talk Pies was the recipient of the Chamber's 2017 Richard B. Kennedy Business of the Year Award (inset right). A rendering above shows the company's \$5 million, 51,000-square-foot facility now under construction.

says this is a re-creation of his grandfather's former Table Talk store on the same street just a block away.

TIF LEVELS PLAYING FIELD

To enable the project, Chacharone Properties sought a 20-year Tax Increment Financing (TIF) plan from the city that was approved last fall. Under this plan, Table Talk Pies will receive an average tax exemption of 80 percent for 20 years – or \$2.2 million tax savings for Chacharone.

The city expects to receive an estimated total of \$750,000 in tax revenue over this 20-year period. "This opportunity allowed us to stay in Worcester and we were very happy about it," says Kokkinis. "We made a commitment that over 50 percent of employees would be Worcester residents and people who live

close by. The TIF lowered our taxes to what's more in line outside [of Worcester]. Being able to lower taxes helps keeps jobs in the city."

Kokkinis credits Kelsey Lamoureux and Ronald Charette and the Worcester Jobs Funds who he says have been great to work with, along with the Quinsigamond Neighborhood Improvement Center to help Table Talk Pies find new employees. The company already began the hiring process this spring along with training interested applicants.

His father Christo reopened the 93-year-old company in 1986 in Kelley Square after it was previously sold in the 1960s and then temporarily closed. Kokkinis eventually joined in running the business, though his father and grandfather continued to work at the sold business through the mid-1970s.



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HIGHER EDUCATION

Panel touts strength of student intern pool

Working with an expert forensic anthropologist on the Whitey Bulger case to restoring the Blackstone Canal and helping LL Bean reshape its millennials marketing, Worcester area college students, faculty and employers alike have a treasure trove of options when it comes to enriching internship possibilities.

Sponsored by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce in concert with sponsor TD Bank, the ongoing monthly Seminar Series offered a panel of experts from local institutions on May 11. The panel included: Cherie Comeau, director for the center of business and industry at Worcester State University, Corey Denenberg Dehner, director of the Worcester Community Projects Center at WPI, Ales Jug, global citizenship coordinator at Becker College, Amy Whitney, director of innovation and entrepreneurship at Clark University; and Judy Kenary, associate vp of academic affairs at Anna Maria College. The session was moderated by Karen Pelletier, Worcester Regional Chamber Director of Higher Ed-Business Partnerships.

All panelists agree that college students today need to start early on as freshmen in preparation for later work as interns. Most colleges and universities in the city have adapted to that growing demand by developing various immersion programs. That process often starts with such simple employment hiring skills training as developing a confident handshake as well as ensuring students' email addresses, social media pages and voicemail greetings are not offensive or misleading to prospective employers.

At Anna Maria College, Kenary says her school interviews every new student during the first week on campus to find their true career and life passions. As early as sophomore year, Kenary works with students on resumes and internships ideas. She does not wait until junior and senior year to begin that critical process. "If we have a curriculum that is not relevant to your industry, you are not going to hire our students," Kenary says, "so we also visit area employers [to better understand their needs]."

With Clark University's little known but nationally top-ranked geography program, Whitney says the school has trained students in the latest mapping information systems to help businesses study themselves and can map data and where it happens in a community. She adds that faculty are constantly looking for area employers with practical-based opportunities that they can then implement into their curriculums. "When students arrive, they are really green," says Whitney. "When they progress and mature, it's really important that we give them experience on the ground to develop critical thinking skills and then apply that in the field."



Left to right, Cherie Comeau, director for the center of business and industry at Worcester State University, Corey Denenberg Dehner, director of the

projects center at WPI, Ales Jug, global citizenship coordinator at Becker College, Amy Whitney, director of innovation and entrepreneurship at Clark

University; and Judy Kenary, associate vp of academic affairs at Anna Maria College.

"Professional communication is one of the greatest skills that is lacking with millennials."

- Corey Denenberg Dehner
Director of WPI Worcester Community Projects Center

Over at Becker College, Jug leads a micro-loan program to find and train students who want to start and run a socially-oriented business. Two recent success stories involve a student who is opening shelters for abandoned animals in the Appalachian Mountains, and other students building sustainable housing for orphans in Haiti. The college's social business course also assists students with creating business plans for refugees.

WPI takes a different approach in one of its internship programs by treating students like independent research consultants, Dehner says, working for up to eight weeks in that position. Also, the engineering-driven school offers two programs to complete a social science research project with an external organiza-

tion, and a three-term project with a local company that matches the students' majors. WPI also offers 6-8 month long co-ops as paid placements.

"Professional communication is one of the greatest skills that is lacking with millennials," says Dehner.

For Comeau's center of business and industry at Worcester State University, she develops numerous community service projects and invites businesses in to speak with students from the employer perspective.

"Our focus is on your current employees in terms of training," says Comeau. "They come on site and run learning and development workshops as well as full certificate-based programs and online training."

Pelletier concludes that the chamber is also working to help build the conduit between its member employers and area as well. A Chamber program called the Intern Hub offers a free platform to connect

members with colleges to help with recruitment and career services. This summer, a free Chamber series titled Higher Ed will be offered to lead professional development skill development workshops.



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HIGHER EDUCATION

StartUp Worcester selects cohort of entrepreneurs

In March 2017, a report released by TechNet and the Progressive Policy Institute named Worcester as one of the top 10 emerging start-up hubs in the country. For the third year, StartUp Worcester is proving the city deserves this title. StartUp Worcester is a partnership between the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, Worcester CleanTech Incubator, and The Venture Forum. This selection process consists of two rounds of judging as well as attending college pitch nights, which results in 12 winning companies who are looking to start their businesses in the region. The 12 selected entrepreneurs are then provided with year-long memberships to all three organizations, work space in the city, and personal business mentors. These resources allow these innovative companies to take their idea from concept to marketplace.

On Tuesday, April 25, StartUp Worcester held the second round of judging at the WPI. This energetic group of young entrepreneurs spent the night putting their best pitch forward in hopes of joining 2017 cohort. The event was sponsored by Commerce Bank.

Although this event has been exclusively open to students and



StartUp Worcester had energetic groups of young entrepreneurs putting their best pitch forward in hopes of joining the victorious three from the first round.

alumni in the past, this year, community members were given a chance to showcase their ideas. From medical devices to game and app developers, a wide variety of industries were on display.

Although not everyone can be a winner, the opportunity to take part in StartUp Worcester is a positive experience for the budding entrepreneurs. Along with taking advantage of the networking opportunities, some treat it as a learning experience. “Taking part in StartUp Worcester gives me experience in pitching my concept,” says Alexis Santiago of Paseo. “The feedback from the judges allows me to validate and solidify my idea which will help me accelerate the

company.”

As an initiative of the Worcester Chamber, StartUp Worcester seeks to maintain the growth of these companies within the region. The broad mix of Worcester natives and out of state college students taking part in this competition strengthens the idea that Worcester should remain one of the top 10 start-up hubs in the country.

Following the second round of judging, the entrepreneurs attended the Five Minute Pitch Contest, hosted by The Venture Forum. Eagerly waiting for the results, they had a chance to show off their posters and listen to other companies pitch their ideas to The Venture Forum.

This night of showcasing innovation and entrepreneurship came to a close as Chamber President Timothy P. Murray announced the nine remaining StartUp Worcester winners. The other three were chosen in advance at college pitch nights.

The 12 winners are Arrow, AsanaRa, Box Mountain Games, Dropwise, FRWD Inc., GeoStage, HydroGlyde Coatings LLC, Psychoactive Entertainment, PW Industries, Simplicity Tech, The Hum, and WooRides.

- Zaven Donoian

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Career Fair looks to retain graduates

On Wednesday, March 29, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with the Worcester Student Government Association and Worcester State University held the third annual Live, Work, Play, Stay! Internship, Career and Live Local Fair. An initiative of the Chamber’s Higher Education and Business Partnership outreach is to bring students and employers together.

With resumes in hand, students from nine area colleges flooded into Worcester State’s new Wellness Center building looking to make an impression. “Everyone is well prepared, engaged and dressed properly,” says Kaylen Vangos of The Hanover Insurance Group. “The resumes look good.”

Recruiters were also impressed with the new Worcester State facility. “The brand new facility is an excellent location,” says Tina Baxter of Tri State Trucking. “Everyone knows Worcester State University.”

From biomedical companies to retail outlets, 61 employers were represented and eager to recruit new members to their teams. Along with these employers, eight area colleges were in attendance and were actively searching for graduate school applicants. Bryte Photo also gave students an opportunity to receive a free professional head shot.

Although career fairs serve as a great networking opportunity for students, it also benefits companies in multiple ways. According to an article published by Business Insider in 2014, there are four

advantages to attending and recruiting at career fairs. The four advantages include: gaining access to a large number of candidates, increasing brand awareness, opportunities to meet with non-traditional candidates, and networking with other companies. The Chamber’s diverse career fair is no exception.

Although the career fair was held on a college campus, the attendees weren’t exclusively students. Among the young hopefuls were experienced professionals. “There is a good mix of college students and experienced professionals,” says Baxter. “Many are looking to increase their skillset through a career change.”

This event reflects the Chamber’s mission to recruit, retain, and incubate, on several fronts. Not only does it provide an educated workforce for Chamber members, but it allows the chamber to connect students with area internships and jobs by accessing local colleges.

“With Worcester being home to various industries and some of the top universities in the country, the Chamber’s Higher Education and Business Partnership initiatives work to maintain an educated workforce and create connections. More college students are looking to stay in Worcester and contribute to the city’s growth and local economy. This career fair, along with other Chamber initiatives reinforce this idea,” says Karen Pelletier, the Chamber’s Director of Higher Education and Business Partnership.

- Zaven Donoian

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Empowerment trumps discrimination

Anita Hill believes women's workplace fight not yet over

The 8th annual Women's Leadership Conference in Worcester captured not only tales from a Mt. Everest adventurer but also the perseverance to fight sexual harassment on a national political stage.

Two powerful speakers headlined the April 13 conference held at the DCU Center in front of 730 women, including Anita Hill, a famous professor of Law, Public Policy and Women's Studies at Brandeis University, and Alison Levine, a world-renowned hiker, humanitarian, author and military leadership trainer.

Looking back on an incident that eventually led to positive change in workplace sexual and gender discrimination policies, Anita Hill, now age 60, says women can experience many forms throughout their careers. However, she adds the trauma is most prevalent when forced to endure harassment during a worker's first career experience.

At age 35, Hill testified in 1991 before the Senate Judiciary Committee, alleging sexual harassment by the later confirmed and current U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas. "I was able to testify because I wasn't the vulnerable 25-year-old," says Hill who had already made tenure at the University of Oklahoma – a first for an African American there before the hearings even began. "But as you move up and opportunities open up for leadership, you're still at risk. There is still a level of vulnerability."

In 1976, a national poll found that nine out of 10 women had been subjected to sexual advances in the workplace yet there were few federal and state rules or company policies in

place to protect them. Hill says that even into the 1980s some judges still viewed sexual extortion and verbal abuse as "personal" and not a legal matter. Moreover, the federal Equal Opportunity Council, charged with enforcing workplace sexual harassment issues, also did not have enough guidelines to deal with the issue at that time.

"So when a person came forward and said there is the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and I'm being harassed, many of the courts said no," Hill says. "It wasn't that just the judges were indifferent."

According to a study published by the American Bar Association in 1991, judges themselves were often found to be harassers. Hill says lawyers reported witnessing judges solicit sexual favors from many women who came before the courts, including criminal defendants, civil litigants, lawyers, prosecutors, public defenders, private counsel, law clerks, court employers, job applicants, probation officers, juvenile court boards and jurors.

"So what happened is women were really left on their own," says Hill. "This was just something that they had to put up with in the workplace and in many cases that was the presumption."

This was the backdrop against which Hill was subpoenaed and testified before Congress regarding Justice Thomas's confirmation hearings. "Here was a case against an individual who

Women's Leadership Conference keynote speaker Anita Hill offered keen insights into her experiences fighting sexual discrimination against U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.



was chair of the EOC in charge of enforcing sexual harassment issues who was also a violator," Hill says. "I testified because of my obligation to my students and as a member of the bar. I knew Thomas would have to sit on sexual harassment cases because they would come. This was about justice and equal access to all."

Moving forward, Hill encouraged conference goers to not think about why women don't come forward enough with claims, but more importantly why women do come forward. She adds that many women voice their concerns and often file charges because they don't want other women to have the same experience.

"We should think of courage as something we can do every day," Hill says. "Because if we don't, just like that Senate judiciary committee tried to make me think like I was the only person who had ever been sexually harassed, we are not going to ever put an end to the problem."

Hill acknowledges that in many

companies and public offices leadership has stepped up since 1991 to address sexual harassment with new tools, policies and actions. The American Bar Association has called out sexual harassment as an ethical violation as has the National Academy of Sciences by convening groups to deal with the problem.

"Businesses have really come together with advocates and enforcement officers to really get to the root of the problem," says Hill. "Sexual harassment is not our burden to bear and it's not our secret to keep any longer."

However, Hill adds that centuries of abuse and neglect doesn't change overnight. Younger tip wage earners are still more vulnerable, according to a recent Boston Globe report. Hill says sexual harassment is often coupled with other forms of discrimination and affects every class level, age, shape, color, religion and sexual identity. "There's no one sexual harassment victim," Hill says.

Diversity panel offers insights into workforce standards

Diversity matters today in the workplace more than ever before, not only to avoid costly lawsuits and public embarrassment, but more importantly in hiring the very best talent available, regardless of race, gender or age.

Led by moderator Stacey D. Luster, Esq., assistant vice president of human resources at Worcester State University, the Women's Leadership Conference "Diversifying Your Workforce" breakout session panelists echoed these sentiments, including Dr. Malika Carter, chief diversity officer for the city of Worcester; Janice Ryan Weekes, director of Workforce Central Career Center; and Bonnie J. Walker, executive director for diversity at WPI.

Luster kept the audience engaged and busy by drawing upon a series of interactive live polls and activities taken during the workshop linked to each panelist's presentations.

Luster opened with having the audience draw the outline of a pig on a blank piece of paper and then hold them up. Then, on the backside of that same paper, audience members were asked to use a visible standardized process for drawing the pig. The differences were stark. She used this analogy to paint a much more serious



Women's Leadership Conference diversity breakout session panelists included: Dr. Malika Carter, chief diversity officer for the city of Worcester; Janice Ryan Weekes, director of Workforce Central Career Center; Bonnie J. Walker, executive director for diversity at WPI; and moderator Stacey D. Luster, Esq., assistant vice president of human resources at WSU.

picture of how poorly devised diversity employment training and leadership is often conducted versus pursuing a standardized process.

"We have a process where everybody should be doing the same thing," says Carter, adding that one of the first things she did under City Manager Edward Augustus was to update and create new standards for discrimination policies and procedures.

Carter first met with as many hiring managers as possible to fully vet the process, and also extended that education out into the city to search for diverse candidates. Then, she added all

city employees into the new screening process so everyone was on board.

"We empowered internally and we executed externally," says Carter, adding that staff now take the characteristics of the person applying and use a scoring sheet to determine if the resume is the right fit to further the interviewing process. That same scoring sheet is used following interviews as well.

"Standardization is legitimization. This process helps us to be transparent with those in the community who are applying," says Carter.

Walker adds that truly understanding why diversity does matter beyond

meeting a quota, satisfying the bottom line or fulfilling hiring legalities is critical for any organization or company that truly wants to evolve.

In a poll of the audience, Luster asked if hiring agents think critically about what is lost when a diverse applicant is not employed, and do their companies think enough about age, gender and race when organizing work teams. About half answered in the affirmative.

"When you are brainstorming about the next benchmark that you want to meet or bringing a team together to goal set," says Walker, "think about who is on that team."

Walker says that it's not only implementing the necessary diversity change, but also caring about those people. Changing demographics play a critical role. "When those folks come into your organization, those are the people you are going to want to retain and continue to build what you have already started."

Commitment to an inclusive workplace culture is conducive to a broader effort to recruit, retain, and develop the most talented and diverse individuals, Walker adds.

SEE DIVERSITY, PAGE B2

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Leading at the highest levels

Speaker inspires crowd with tales of Everest, freed Ugandan slaves

After scaling Mt. Everest twice, the second attempt reaching summit, Levine founded the Climb High Foundation, which trains jobless women in western Uganda to work as trekking guides in the Rwenzori Mountains. In both roles, Levine spoke during the recent Women's Leadership Forum to the core business and military leadership principle of overcoming adversity.

"Sometimes you are going to have to go backwards for a bit in order to eventually get to where you want to be," says Levine, referencing the exhausting routine of navigating up and down between high camps several times on Mt. Everest to acclimate to thin air. "Don't look at backtracking as losing ground [in life]. Look at it as an opportunity to regroup and regain some strength so you are better out of the gates the next time around. Backing up is not the same as backing down... It's about the lessons you learn along the way."

She adds, "the only reason I made it all the way up Mt. Everest is because I had that earlier failure [to summit] back in 2002."

Levine, who has climbed the tallest peaks on six continents, says a lack of failure tolerance stifles progress, innovation and prevents people from taking risks. She advises that when you set high goals, allow the team the freedom to think and inspire future participants.

Besieged by civil war, an eventual peace treaty between Uganda and the Republic of Congo paved the way for Levine's organization to effect change. Working as a native trekking guide or porter in the Rwenzori Mountains proved difficult when access to them was shut off due to war. "People in western Uganda were basically starving to death," says Levine. "But I noticed



"Sometimes you are going to have to go backwards for a bit in order to eventually get to where you want to be."

- Alison Levine,

motivational speaker



when hiking there in 2005 that women were doing all of the physical labor. So I asked if women could be guides and porters, and the male guide told me it was taboo."

That's until Levine decided to try to change commonly accepted slavery conditions there. In Uganda, women were considered the property of men. They had no land rights, affordable access to education for adults and their children, or health care. As a result, the average female life expectancy was only 42. Levine demanded change among male elders, arguing that employing women on the mountains would generate more revenue for the village

and in turn would help fund health care and education. It would also help end poverty and social injustice.

So Levine set off to recruit and train as many women who were willing to become mountain trekking guides and porters with a condition: "If they [women] can train and carry heavy gear in the mountains like the men do, you have to hire them and pay them the same wage you pay local men."

The elders agreed, believing it would never be possible. These women lived at the base of these mountains their entire lives but were never allowed up them.

"The fact that these women were able to climb up 14,000 feet and strap 12 kilograms on their back to complete the trekking circuit with a smile on their face was just amazing. The team of women showed their entire village that they can do whatever they want to do and breakthrough traditional barriers."

Today, women in Uganda are regularly employed as porters and trekking guides, earning the same wage as men. Levine goes back every few years to train more women to work in those mountains.

"The only way progress happens is if people ask questions," Levine says.

DIVERSITY, FROM PAGE B1

Walker drew a stark illustration by comparing two companies: one with a diverse workplace and ability to retain employees versus one without. She points to key trends of why supporting diversity matters in colleges with raised expectations of the need for more workplace inclusion.

Without a strong diversity employment approach, Walker adds that companies won't even attract the right talent and it could create morale problems down the road.

Weekes says that with 31 career centers across the Commonwealth, with Worcester alone serving 37 communities, there is often a misconception that her agency is just for job seekers. "We now do personalized recruiting for just your own company's job fair," says Weekes. "If you are looking for particular populations, we are willing to work with you."

Using the center's JobQuest online employment server, Weekes adds that her agency is also reaching out more to Worcester Public Schools.

Luster adds that job descriptions can be discriminatory in their own right. She encourages employers to review their own job listings to ensure that they are not restrictive and limiting to an outside candidate.

"It's not reducing a job description, it's making it more open to a wider pool of applicants," says Luster.



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PROGRAMS & EVENTS

Panel shares tips on improving customer service

The most recent installment of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's Seminar Series offers keen insight into how the development of a customer service culture serves as a powerful tool for establishing consumer loyalty.

"If you don't take care of your customers, somebody else is going to take care of them for you," says Michael Flippin, chief training officer for Sandler Training/SaleFish LLC, who was also the seminar moderator. "Your best customer is someone else's best potential customer."

Alongside Flippin was a table of panelists from different industries, including Jamie Adams, regional market manager of TD Bank in the Worcester Region, Michael Covino, president of Niche Hospitality Group, and Jessica Bettencourt, president of Klem's.

"I think customer service is where we can differentiate ourselves from competition," says Bettencourt, adding that being a large independent retailer with a wide variety of products, Klem's has to provide a high level of service. "It's really one of the only ways that we can compete. It's providing customers with what they need and what they don't even know they need."

For TD Bank, convenience has been at the forefront of customer service practices. According to Adams, convenience can't be the only asset that keeps them competing. New technology in the digital age has made banking easier by providing instant results. Adams points out that this has caused a change in the need to physically go to the bank. He defines customer service in the financial industry as providing trusted advice. "The highest form of flattery for us is when someone can recommend us to somebody else. I would say as a personal banker, the highest form of flattery for me is when a customer won't make a decision in their financial life without consulting with me first," says Adams.

Covino mirrors this by emphasizing



Jamie Adams, regional market manager of TD Bank in the Worcester Region, Michael Covino, president of Niche Hospitality Group (standing), and Jessica Bettencourt, president of Klem's led the panel discussion on customer service.

that the customer's experience should be a memorable one. "People make decisions based on emotion," he says.

In a successful customer service culture, the internal relationships are just as important as the external. This means that the interaction between employer and employee should be treated the same as an interaction with the customer. "We call it a culture of hospitality...You can't have external hospitality if you don't have internal," says Covino. "Most of our pearls of hospitality are around internal hospitality...Everyone is always talking about giving 100 percent...we call it 51 percent...A '51 percenter' at work means that they're 51 percent emotional and 49 percent technical. It means that what they're doing, they're doing because they love it slightly more than their actual ability to do it."

Internal customer service practices ensure that employees are motivated and willing to be held responsible for the consumer experience. Adams spoke of using Service Level Agreements as a tool to measure TD Bank's legendary service. "We have to have this consistent vision painted from the top about what legendary looks like. I think that's where you start to develop culture, when it's just relentless and there's accountability across the board for everyone."

"Internal customer service is probably one of the most important aspects," adds Bettencourt, mentioning that her immediate customers are her employees. "It's not about selling; it's really about solving whatever issues they come in with." She also believes that internal service relies on each person doing their job. "I want my employees to know I got their back."

Elaborating on this, Flippin asked the panelists to explain what they do to empower their team members.

Addressing the advancement of technology, Bettencourt explains how keeping employees off their phones is a losing battle. However, due to the use of a phone app, Klem's has been able to scan products and expedite potential issues by providing the customer with immediate results. "We empower them [employees] to be able to have their phone, but be able to use it to provide service."

Adding to this, Adams says, "We empower everyone up to our front line employees to be able to say yes." When measuring standards, Adams feels it's vital to understand everyone's role. "Teach your job to the person below you and learn the job of the person above you. That really permeates throughout our culture."

He also adds that when employees approach him with questions, he

prefers to ask for their recommendation instead of answering it for them. Doing this empowers employees to make future decisions on their own as well as reinforcing the customer service culture.

When developing a customer service culture, panelists feel it's important to focus on both the internal and external factors. From establishing respect and accountability within the company to going above and beyond for consumers, a strong customer service culture will make any business a viable competitor.

"In the end, we are all consumers, and we expect a certain level of responsibility to be taken for our experience. As consumers, we want to be heard," Adams says.

- Zaven Donoian

Developing a Customer Service Culture- Repeat Performance

Date: June 6

Time: 8:30-10 am

Location:

Worcester

Regional

Chamber

Fees/Admission:

Free for Chamber

members; \$25 for non-members

Workshop Information:

8:30 am Registration, coffee & muffins

8:45 am Panel and discussion

10:00 am Closing

Register: <http://business.worcesterchamber.org/events/details/seminar-series-developing-a-customer-service-culture-repeat-performance-5020>

Moderator & Speaker: Michael Flippin, Sandler Training / SaleFish,

Panel Participants:

Jessica Bettencourt, President-Klem's

Jamie Adams,

Regional Manager at TD Bank

Special thanks to TD Bank for sponsoring the 2017 Seminar Series.

Experts push health care strategies for employers

In 2006, Massachusetts pioneered health care reform strategies that were then used as a model for the federal Affordable Care Act in 2010. Since then, the complexities of reform and overall health care cost continue to expand, resulting in confusion among Massachusetts business owners and residents.

In response to this, insurance advisors such as Todd McDonald, president of Aisling Partners Insurance Brokerage and David Soltys of Small Business Insurance Agency, have begun to develop new, creative methods for employers to adopt. On March, 7, McDonald and Soltys served as presenters for the latest installment of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce Seminar Series. The program focused on business perspectives from a local standpoint, as well as tools to develop modern health care strategies for employers.

According to McDonald, the three main factors driving current health insurance markets are the economy, rising health care costs, and the uncertain approach of a new administration. "This slide is no different than it was eight years ago," says McDonald, referring to the presentation displaying the three factors.

In order to set the scene of the current market, McDonald and Soltys examined the process of healthcare reform. "The inclusion of so many elements...has just been a tremendous burden on the insurance companies...employers...and advisors," says McDonald.

From a local standpoint, Massachusetts has successfully covered the uninsured, resulting in an insured rate of 97%. However, the cost of healthcare has not reduced and containment of it remains the

"...We've had the most mandates of any state, and no surprise the corresponding cost is 33% higher than the average."

*- Todd McDonald,
president of Aisling Partners*

biggest challenge. "Health insurance is expensive because healthcare is expensive," says McDonald. In an effort to address cost containment issues, a variety of measures have been pursued at the local level. One of these cost containment tools comes in the form of mandates, which in the end, have had a reverse effect. "Those add layers of cost, and in Massachusetts, we've had the most mandates of any state, and no surprise the corresponding cost is 33% higher than the average."

Other cost containment tools include interstate and free market competition. "I think this is back on the table. It's an initiative of the Trump administration... I think that most of us believe the more competition the better. It's something you are going to see more and more of moving forward," says McDonald. "There are no easy answers. It's a shared responsibility."

According to national trends, there has been a philosophical and financial shift in the types of healthcare plans that employers are offering. Over the past 10 years, consumer driven health plans (CDHP) have seen a dramatic increase. This includes high

deductible health plans like Health Reimbursement Arrangements and Health Savings Accounts. As of 2016, 29% of insured employees are covered under CDHP, a 25% increase from 2006. "I can confidently suggest that you're going to see that trajectory carry forward significantly," says McDonald.

McDonald also points out that companies containing 200 or more employees have been making use of incentives when designing their health plans. These incentives for employees come in the form of rewards for completing health promotion activities such as biometric screenings and wellness programs. "Regardless of market size, wellness and engagement is paramount," says McDonald. "Putting incentives in place will drive behavior."

Along with wellness initiatives, employee surveys have been important in the decision making process for employers. "Getting employee feedback is important and critical to your decision," says Soltys addressing the crowd of Chamber members. "We're fortunate in Massachusetts to have five or six of the best health plans in the country...we as employees know that. If employers ask their employees, I think employees are willing to cost share a little bit more."

With constant debate and changes to health care policy on both the national and local levels, employers can easily lose sight of how to pick the best health plan. Many business owners have been able to implement creative health care strategies in order to work around the complexities of the industry. "I don't have the crystal ball...but there's indication that the burden will be lessened," says McDonald.

~ Zaven Donoian

PROGRAMS & EVENTS

Performance leadership takes preparation, action

Rod Fraser believes managers simply need to right the ship before an employee gets too far off course.

As lead consultant for Professional Leadership Management Services, and as a former Boston Fire Commissioner during the Marathon Bombing, Winter Storm Nemo, and Hurricanes Sandy and Irene, Fraser's most sage advice comes from his vast experience while serving in THE US Navy for 30 years.

"It's your responsibility as a leader to coach them and get them the training that they need to be successful," adding that supervisors must also record that conversation and process just in case it doesn't work out.

Setting goals, developing a career path, engagement and making employees feel valued are the best things managers can do to motivate their staffs, says Fraser, who spoke at the Chamber's monthly Seminar Series on Performance Leadership in March.

A 2013 survey conducted with hundreds of companies about using performance management systems to track employee progress found that 51 percent of those firms admitted their systems still need more work. Moreover, 42 percent found their good performance linkage to added compensation was faulty and only 22 percent use 360-degree feedback, or a method to gather feedback from all peers to form a consensus prior to a performance evaluation. Additionally,



Performance leadership consultant Rod Fraser believes companies must track employee progress and hold people accountable.

48 percent of companies in that same survey felt their performance systems need more work and only 3 percent said the existing systems provided exceptional value.

"When I was in the Navy, their performance management system makes you rank everybody," says Fraser. "You have to rank in the top 10 percent so if you're not one of those top people, it's not a happy day for you."

In a casual poll of his audience, most all of the 60 managers in attendance felt systems that encouraged one-on-one performance discussions and feedback with direct reports needed improvement.

He adds that improving communication through newsletters is an effective way to spread inside company information and help motivate employees.

Fraser finds that listening and observation can be powerful tools when it comes to discerning the culture of a particular employee department.

"I never smoked in my life, but I use to go out and hang with the smokers on smoke break and you come away with all sorts of information that employees would only share with each other there."

Managing a team should not be micro-management, Fraser says, but it also does not mean a manager should not check in and ask questions about job performance. Management by walking around is the new buzz word in leadership training today, but really is an old school tactic. "Just being present makes people more in tune that they need to be doing their job," adds Fraser.

Specific feedback needs to be both positive and negative but sometimes, Fraser says, it's needs to be more critical.

If an employee is not performing at a high level and additional and documented feedback and training has already been provided, then next steps should involve a written performance action plan followed by possible termination, Fraser says.

"You can improve yourself in any way you want by thinking about it and by studying. We learn by doing," Fraser says. "Personal goal setting should be a corporate and personal pursuit."

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PROGRAMS & EVENTS

New truck, grant feeds the future at Food Hub

There's a lot of fresh support feeding the Worcester Food Hub, now in its second year of operation.

A new \$500,000 grant from the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts will enable the Food Hub to collect local produce from area farms and then distribute it in local schools. To help with that distribution, a new 16-foot refrigerator truck was purchased by the Worcester County Food Bank.

Health Foundation CEO Janice B. Yost helped unveil the truck and grant in a ceremony held at North High School in Worcester on May 8. She says the truck will help extend the reach of the Food Hub's purposes while also boosting the Food Bank's capacity to distribute healthy foods to its broad network of hunger relief partners.

Worcester County Food Bank Executive Director Jean G. McMurray says her organization is pleased to be a continued partner in the Food Hub's implementation phase by hosting the program for the second year at its headquarters on Route 9 at the Worcester/Shrewsbury line. The Food Hub business is housed in the Bank's licensed commercial kitchen, and its separate aggregation and distribution of local fruits and vegetables division operates out of the warehouse there.

"We are excited about the Food Hub's potential for growth in the number of food entrepreneurs using the kitchen and our local farmers supplying fresh produce as well as the number of institutions purchasing the produce," says McMurray.

Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Timothy P. Murray says Worcester County has more farms than any other county in Massachusetts. "Linking these farms with consumers is critical, and with 25,000 students and counting, there's no bigger consumer than Worcester Public Schools," adds Murray.

Murray believes that the Chamber's Food Hub incubator and commercial kitchen will also help to further develop the city's food culture and recipes with 55 new restaurant licenses awarded in the past 18 months.

Additionally, Murray acknowledges the need for more branding and marketing, as evidenced by the new Worcester Food Hub logo that was created and designed by Assumption College student Emily Simpson.

At the event, the very first delivery inside the truck was apples grown by Carlson Orchards in Harvard intended for Worcester Public Schools students. Carlson Orchards co-owner Frank Carlson says his farm has always supported the farm-to-school project, but never had the means to do store door deliveries until now.

The program's Hub for Aggregation, Marketing, and Distribution segment provides greater market opportunities for local farms by offering logistical support to help increase the produce purchased by local institutions, as well as the amount of affordable, local, healthy food available in under-served communities.

The aggregation portion of the Food Hub program currently supports about a dozen local small to mid-size farms.



From left to right: Steve Fischer, executive director of the Regional Environmental Council; Frank Carlson, Carlson Farms; Tim Murray, president and CEO of the WRCC; Jan Yost; CEO of The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts; Maureen Binienda, superintendent of Worcester Public Schools; Jean McMurray, executive director of the Worcester County Food Bank; Donna Lombardi, director of School Nutrition at Worcester Public Schools. Picture shot at North High School.

New kitchen manager hired at warehouse facility

The Worcester Regional Food Hub announced in March the hiring of Worcester native Neil Rogers as its new kitchen operations manager.

A Shrewsbury native, Rogers brings with him more than 20 years of experience in restaurants in New England. Most recently, Neil served as the executive chef de cuisine for Niche Hospitality Group in Central Massachusetts. Prior to that role, Rogers held positions as executive chef for Tomasso Trattoria and Enoteca/Panzano Market in Southborough; regional manager for Texas-based Love Shack celebrity restaurant group; and as chef de cuisine for Max's Oyster Bar/Trumbull Kitchen/ Max's Tavern in Hartford, Conn. and Springfield. He was chosen as one of the Chamber's 2016-17 Leadership Worcester program participants. He also was honored as Worcester's Best Chef by Foodies of New England in 2014, and as a 40 Under 40 recipient by the Worcester Biz Journal in 2015.

Rogers will manage day-to-day operations of the Commercial Kitchen Incubator program of the Worcester Regional Food Hub. Neil will be the primary point of contact for tenants, taking them from an intake process through to producing their food products in a licensed commercial kitchen.

Additionally, Rogers will provide onsite assistance to support the development of food businesses by farmers, caterers, and other food entrepreneurs looking to start or grow an existing enterprise.

For more info, call Rogers at 508-842-3663, ext 242.



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OPINION

Discover Central Massachusetts sells the region

Hotel occupancy rates in the city of Worcester averaged 73.5 percent in March 2017, a 6.8% increase over the previous year, according to Discover Central Massachusetts, the region's travel and tourism agency. The data provided by Smith Travel Report (STR) also cited an increase in Worcester's average daily rate for an overnight stay by almost 6%. This is good news for existing hotels and even better news for current and prospective hotel developers looking to build in the city. This past month, Homewood Suites by Hilton opened its doors across from Union Station, adding another 117 hotel rooms to the city's inventory.

"This data signals that Worcester is a competitive marketplace for conventions, meetings and events," says Christina Andreoli, president of Discover Central Massachusetts. "Our sales team is aggressively selling Worcester as a premiere destination."

In 2016, Discover Central Massachusetts reported that over 23,000 rooms were booked through its agency, with an economic impact of more than \$13 million to the region. Discover Central Massachusetts recently printed a comprehensive Meeting and Event Planner Guide, which is downloadable on the new web site at www.discovercentralma.org/meet. The agency also attends national trade shows and provides site tours to meeting planners and sports organizers to showcase the city's assets.

In March, Michael Lucey, the agency's sports sales manager, attended the National Association of Sports Commissions Symposium. With over 45 appointments scheduled, Mr. Lucey was able to connect with several sports event planners, providing potential leads for future events. Some of these groups included USA Softball, Urban Warrior Games, US Lacrosse, US Baseball, US Badminton, and US Gymnastics, among others.

"The show was very successfully," said Mr. Lucey. "In fact, as a result of a conversation, Worcester, in partnership with the Worcester Bravehearts, placed a bid on the 2019 U18 Baseball World Cup."

Other events headed for Central Massachusetts this year include the Spartan Race at Treasure Valley Scout Reservation in Rutland, 2017 American Legion Baseball – Northeast Regionals at Fitton Field at The Hanover Insurance Park, Vibram Open – PDGA National Tour at Maple Hill in Leicester, and the Massachusetts Democratic Convention at the DCU Center, among many others! To learn more about events, visit www.discovercentralma.org.

The agency also attends consumer-focused trade shows, such as the AAA Travel Marketplace at Gillette Stadium and Day Trips and Destinations in Plainville, Conn. The third edition of the Central Massachusetts Visitors Guide is also available (Spring/ Summer). It can be obtained by calling 508-753-1550.



Small businesses are the anchor

Working at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's mail room as a kid in high school taught me a very valuable lesson that's been reinforced countless times and helped me during my time as a lawyer, mayor and lieutenant governor: Small business owners substantially drive the economic underpinnings of Worcester and our entire region. This is backed up by data from the United States Small Business Administration (SBA). According to the SBA, small businesses provide 55% of all jobs and 66% of all net new jobs since the 1970s.

While much of this newspaper is devoted to capturing the unprecedented growth in our downtown and several commercial properties in Worcester's neighborhoods, we can never forget or minimize the role small businesses play throughout Worcester and Central Massachusetts. Without them, none of the tremendous transformation we are witnessing today would be possible. In fact, two of the businesses featured in stories within this edition were started by individual entrepreneurs with an idea. Both of these companies, Imperial Distributors, and Table Talk Pies, started small and today are significant employers that provide products throughout the country.

In May, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the SBA co-sponsored the second annual Woostapreneurs Forum at Worcester State University. In speaking with many budding entrepreneurs and future small business owners, I emphasized that small business owners and prospective entrepreneurs should not be afraid to reach out and get the advice and help they need. We are blessed in Central Massachusetts with a plethora of agencies and organizations that can provide guidance — many times at little cost.

That's why we at the Chamber are doubling down



TIM MURRAY

on partnerships to create new businesses. These partnerships involve the Small Business Development Center, SCORE, SBA, Center for Women and Enterprise, and our many valued lenders and banks to name a few.

There is lots of information as well as access to capital available that can save a small business or entrepreneur both time and money. This gives the business owner more time to devote to selling or improving their product or idea.

Not surprisingly, Worcester was recently voted one of the top 10 up-and-coming cities for small business start-ups in the country. Worcester was listed alongside much larger cities we hear about regularly. This success and recognition speaks volumes to the innovation happening right here at home, much of it fueled by our colleges and universities. Additionally, our diverse and entrepreneurial immigrant populations add significantly to this start-up dynamic as well.

It's truly inspiring to see people who are not afraid to take risks, and work hard to ensure that their business is successful. In doing so, they pay tribute to the blue collar ethos that remains strong in Worcester and the region.

At the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, our staff works hard to cultivate all of these things and foster innovation. We are a resource for all small businesses, whether they are a Chamber member or not; on a daily basis we seek to recruit, retain, and incubate small businesses. We are very excited about what exists ahead for the future of our city and region.

No longer should Worcester be known as New England's second largest city. We are becoming New England's best city and helping elevate all of Central Massachusetts.

- Timothy P. Murray is president and CEO of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce.

My semester interning at the Chamber

As a Communications Media student at Fitchburg State University, I was faced with the task of landing a full-time, semester long internship in order to fulfill the requirements of my degree. Although this process is supposed to be exciting, I was constantly worried about the type of internship I might be forced to accept. Would I need to travel hours to get there? Would it be better than sitting in a classroom all day? Will the work be enjoyable? Thanks to the internship placement program at FSU, I was pointed in the right direction. A few phone calls and an interview later, I accepted an internship position at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce.

From day one at the Chamber, I realized I found the perfect place to live out the rest of my college career. As someone who has lived in Holden for 22 years, I have had the opportunity to see Worcester grow into a destination. From riding my bike around the city before my driver's license days, to finding my first part time job here, I have always considered Worcester home. The Chamber has allowed me to get a behind-the-scenes look at how this city continues to develop and evolve.

The first thing I noticed that made me appreciate working with the Chamber was the evident dedication to the city of Worcester and Central Mass that surrounds this organization. From its hardworking staff to the diversified member businesses, the Chamber serves as a driving force in positively impacting the local economy, community, and overall quality of life in the city.

I was continuously impressed with the wide range of Chamber events and initiatives that were not only geared towards promoting a successful business community but were often educational and motivating. From seeing Anita Hill speak at the Worcester Women's Leadership Conference to attending informative seminars and industry specific round tables, I quickly realized the importance of the connections that the Chamber works to facilitate. These connections bring businesses, ideas, and people together right in the heart of the

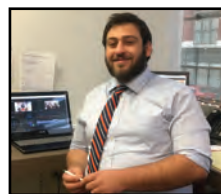
Commonwealth. Seeing this unfold first hand instilled a sense of meaning into my internship experience. Not only did I get to work with the local business community, but I had the opportunity to work with people who have as much Worcester pride as I do.

With the Chamber's active involvement in the revitalization of Worcester, I was able to stay up-to-date on the city's latest ventures. In the short time that I interned at the Chamber, JetBlue announced flights to JFK in New York, Worcester was named one of the top 10 start-up emerging hubs in the country, and the Worcester Railers disclosed the New York Islanders as their NHL affiliate. As an intern, it was exciting to work with an organization that is so instrumental in contributing to the upward trend of Worcester's staying power.

When it came to day-to-day work activities, I was always faced with something new. From viewing live tapings of Tim Murray's "Chamber Exchange" TV show to covering events and producing my own videos, the Chamber provided me with an ever-changing work week. The Chamber not only gave me the opportunity to try new things, it also allowed me to incorporate my own ideas and skillset into their everyday marketing operations. This also helped make my internship experience rewarding and worthwhile.

My semester at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce was both educational and rewarding. Along with the academic requirements that were being met, the personal experience I was looking to get out of internship went above my expectations. Working with the Chamber exposed me to a community of people and businesses devoted to the future of Worcester. Like many college grads living in the area, I plan on working and living here. With organizations like the Chamber working to better our community and economy, Worcester residents will continue to see their city see thrive and evolve.

- Zaven was hired full-time by the Chamber in May.



ZAVEN DONOIAN

OPINION

RESPONSIVE SOLUTIONS

Decriminalization of recreational marijuana at the workplace

By Joseph T. Bartulis, Esq.,

On Nov. 8, 2016, the voters in Massachusetts decriminalized recreational use of marijuana. The law took effect on December 16, 2016.

In light of the new recreational marijuana use law, employers have three common questions:

1. What impact does the new recreational marijuana use law have on an employer's ability to discharge or discipline an employee who comes to work under the influence of marijuana?

2. What impact does the new recreational marijuana use law have on an employer's ability to prohibit the possession of small, recreational use amounts of marijuana on company property?

3. May an employer continue to drug test employees for marijuana now that it has been decriminalized, and may an employer make hiring or termination decisions based on a positive marijuana test result?

The short answer to the first two questions is "none." The decriminalization of marijuana for recreational use by persons twenty-one and over has no impact whatsoever on an employer's ability to continue to prohibit all employees from being under the influence of marijuana at work, from using it during work time, or from possessing it in the workplace. It is business as usual for employers with policies which address these first two questions and for employers seeking to implement such policies. An express provision within the recreational marijuana use law provides that employers may

"enact and enforce workplace policies restricting the consumption of marijuana by employees." MGL c. 94G, section 2(e).

Regarding the third question, an employer's ability to test for marijuana use now depends on the timing of and reason for the drug test: Is it pre-employment, reasonable suspicion, or random testing of persons in safety-sensitive positions? What is the employer's need for the information?

In Massachusetts there is no express law which prohibits drug testing. However, through case law, the Massachusetts courts have weighed the privacy rights an individual has regarding bodily fluids, or the expectations of privacy of the individual, against the employer's need for the information. See MGL. c. 214 section 1B. See also *Barbuto v. Advantage Sales & Marketing, Inc.*, 48 F.Supp.3d 145 (D. Mass. 2015) (medical marijuana case presently on direct appellate review by Mass. Supreme Judicial Court).

Regarding pre-employment drug testing, it may occur so long as:

1) the applicant is made aware of the drug testing in the job posting before he or she applies for the job;

2) it only occurs after the employee has been given a conditional offer of employment - conditioned only on his or her passage of the drug test; and

3) all recipients of conditional offers for the particular position are also drug

tested. If the employer drug tests for a particular position, all selected candidates for that particular job should be tested.

- Joseph T. Bartulis, Esq., is an Employment Law attorney at Fletcher Tilton PC.

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