



WORCESTER IS FERTILE GROUND FOR NEW & EXPANDING SERVICE, CREATIVE FIRMS

**By Emily Gowdey-Backus,
Director of Communications**

Outgrowing their office space and looking to tap into local, young talent, in December 2014 David Crouch and his team at ten24 Digital Solutions moved their software development firm from Northborough to Worcester. Those 13 miles would prove an exponential impact on their business as well as employee quality of life.

To-date, said Mr. Crouch, it's not only the proximity to Worcester's nine colleges and universities, from which they recruit regularly, which he counts as a benefit of the relocation, it's the surrounding success of the downtown, draw of the Theater District, impact of the upcoming Worcester Red Sox, and proximity to Mercantile Center.

"I can't claim we had some

incredible vision," said Mr. Crouch, of his decision. The growth, in both business and employees, ten24 experienced in the past five years he said is due to "a bit of luck" and long-term perseverance on behalf of the City of Worcester and fellow businesses which led to a "180-degree" change in the atmosphere of the neighborhood.

Success comes to firms of all shapes and sizes. Over the past 18 months, however, the brightest stories among the city's business community are those of firms, like ten24, who are small- to medium-sized, new to the city, and discovering first-hand the opportunity, access to talent, and first-class location that sets Worcester apart.

Creative firms, architects, geographic service providers,

and financial institutions are among those which have tested the waters and found the business community east of Rt. 1-495 commercially fertile and home to a strong quality of life.

ACCESS TO TALENT

Because the majority of their clients are located outside of Massachusetts, let alone Worcester, said Mr. Crouch, ten24 could be located anywhere. They chose to operate out of Worcester because of the proximity to and volume of higher education institutions.

"We were having a hard time recruiting younger talent to Northborough," said Mr. Crouch adding the firm also looked at Boston for relocation. However, he felt "it was more about the right location, the right talent" and with the help of the Worcester Business Development Corporation the firm chose Worcester.

Looking back, Mr. Crouch feels it was the right decision. Not only do the majority of his employees live locally, when the firm moved nearly five years ago, their payroll was 13 people. Now, he said, that's grown to 37 people with "a manageable" three or four new hires each year thanks to the city's strong higher education sector.

With a physical presence in Worcester, he said, "we have better access to and have a better chance of recruiting and [retaining] some of those younger developers."

For others, Worcester is not just rife with talent, but also business to



ABOVE: Associate Principal Aimee Lombardo, right, with Mark Ritz, left, and Alicia Maillet, center, at the architecture firm's Worcester office. Photo by Emily Gowdey-Backus.

business opportunity.

While the branch opened Nov. 1, Brian Renstrom, blumshapiro Massachusetts managing partner, expects the firm's 36 months of sustained 20 percent year-over-year growth to be supported by the opportunity – "350 to 400" potential clients – he sees in Worcester.

After announcing their launch in June, by September Mr. Renstrom reported interest was so high that five Boston employees were transferred to Worcester – eliminating their commute and employing them closer to home.

While LLB Architects' existing Central Massachusetts clients were excited by the launch of a satellite office in late August 2018, what Associate Principal Aimee Lombardo found intriguing was her colleagues' desire to work in the Southbridge Street office adjacent to The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts.

"I'm getting a lot of requests from people interested in working in Worcester," she said. "We've already expanded our office because we didn't foresee the [popularity] ... in the first year."

SEE SUCCESS, PAGE 10

CHAMBER URGES FOR GRADUAL ADOPTION OF SINGLE TAX RATE

By Tim Kane, Correspondent

With clear solutions developed, competition growing, and a negative trend of manufacturing businesses leaving the city, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce is sounding the alarm for city councilors to gradually transition to a single tax rate.

Worcester currently has a dual tax system dating back to 1984, which charges businesses and residents different property tax rates. Since the split, the city's commercial/industrial tax rate has become among the highest in the state, according to Massachusetts Department of Revenue records. Worcester's adopted tax rates for Fiscal Year 2019 were \$18 per \$1,000 of assessed value for residential dwellers compared to \$34.90 per \$1,000 for commercial/industrial properties – the highest in Central Massachusetts and Worcester County.

Of 351, just 116 cities and towns in Massachusetts utilize a dual tax rate,

per 2019 state data.

According to Chamber research, over fiscal years 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 a majority of Worcester city councilors voted to increase the total tax bills on commercial/industrial property owners during the same four-year period.

The second-largest city in New England, Worcester's commercial/industrial tax rate is currently double that of at least seven neighboring towns – many of which boast pad-ready sites.

"If you want to attract commercial/industrial investment, you have to be competitive," said Chamber President & CEO Timothy P. Murray. "It's particularly important to manufacturing because they take up a good amount of land and are also taxed on their equipment. When you have a manufacturer that has an older facility and they want to upgrade, the assessment will go up so they have to factor that into their

SEE TAXATION, PAGE 15

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If you're interested in being a point of distribution, or would like to know more about placing an advertisement in the Chamber Exchange, please contact Kristen Luna, membership sales and services, at kluna@worcesterchamber.org. To contact the editorial staff, please email Emily Gowdey-Backus, director of communications, at egowdeybackus@worcesterchamber.org.

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

REGIONAL RAIL IS A MUST TO FUEL ECONOMIC GROWTH IN WORCESTER AND METROWEST

By Timothy P. Murray, Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President & CEO

Traffic congestion is quickly becoming a mobility crisis across Eastern and Central Massachusetts. Not only has it caused a major annoyance for everyone forced to sit in gridlock for hours, it also poses a very real threat to our region's growth and prosperity.

This problem isn't going away.

In fact, for those of us who live and work between Worcester and Boston, the situation will soon get even worse as four major construction projects are scheduled to begin along the Massachusetts Turnpike are cause for more disruption over the next decade.

A saving grace is the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority commuter rail line. Every day, more than 11,000 people ride the Worcester/Framingham line traveling to and from Boston. According to Massachusetts Dept. of Transportation's central transportation planning staff, that number has increased more than 46 percent since 2012.

If you think traffic is bad now, imagine if all those riders were in their cars every day instead.

As fortunate as we are to have the commuter rail, its ability to further grow is hamstrung by an outdated operating model. The current operating model does not allow for frequent hourly service which makes utilization a non-starter. If we want to address this mobility crisis, it's time to upgrade the concept of commuter rail to regional rail – a frequent, on-the-hour service to and from Worcester and Boston with modernized subway-like speeds.

A recent TransitMatters report demonstrates that the MBTA could be running trains every 15 to 30 minutes along the Worcester/Framingham Line, throughout the day, with Worcester-to-Boston trip times of under an hour, and Worcester-to-Framingham of a little over a half hour.

What changes would be required to achieve this? First, the line must be electrified. This means erecting electric wires along the tracks and replacing the current fleet of outdated, unreliable, dirty diesel locomotives with new, self-powered passenger trains called electric-multiple units. EMUs can get up to speed much faster than diesel locomotives therefore spending less time pulling in and out of each station. They're also far more reliable, requiring maintenance 10 times less often (or better) than their diesel counterparts.

The second step is raising station platforms. Boarding-level platforms at all stations allow passengers to get on or off much faster than our current system allows.

Fortunately, we already have all of the most expensive requirements of a modern regional rail system – the land, the stations, the parking, and



ABOVE: Noting the mounting congestion plaguing Eastern and Central Massachusetts, Timothy P. Murray, Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce president and CEO, argues commuter rail system could be a solution.

the rails themselves. Therefore, the cost of modernizing the Worcester line is less than the amount previously allocated to the stalled South Station Expansion project.

Soon, the MBTA will have to purchase new trains to replace their aging fleet. Instead of buying yet more locomotives, now is the time to transition to EMUs and buy enough of them for the Providence line, which is already electrified. By updating the Providence line first, this frees up locomotives for a more-developed service schedule on the Worcester Line before it is electrified.

As we plan long term, we need to address short-term challenges presented by the impending Mass Pike construction projects.

First, the MBTA must abandon its current plans to close one of the Worcester-line tracks during the construction. Reducing service on the commuter rail while this work takes place is unacceptable. In fact, it should be doing the opposite by increasing to hourly service during construction.

Second, fares should be lowered to entice more people to take the train during construction. The MBTA's successful \$10 weekend fare initiative demonstrated clearly that lower fares increase ridership. Since the trains will be running anyway, it makes sense to get as many people on board as possible.

With short-term challenges addressed, we can then focus on the bigger picture: regional rail on the Worcester line. This means committing the funding necessary to electrify the system; buying additional new, modern trains; and eliminating bottlenecks on the line.

We can't fix our mobility crisis overnight, but if we make the right investments today we may avoid a future where our regional prosperity gets bogged down in gridlock.

Timothy P. Murray

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

NOVEMBER

- 19 Women's Information Network (WIN) Impact Investing: Aligning Your Money with Your Values @Mechanics Hall
- 19 French Riviera Trip Information Session @Chamber
- 20 Financial Services Roundtable: Keeping Regulators Happy in 2020: Fiduciary Duty and other Changes in Financial Services Law @Chamber (311 Main St. Worcester, MA 01608)
- 21 Seminar Series: Industry Tax & Financial Trends: Don't be the last to know @Chamber
- 21 Business After Hours @EcoTarium

DECEMBER

- 4 Ambassador Meeting
- 6 Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's 144th Annual Meeting @DCU Center
- 10 WIN: Play Now, Party Later @Mechanics Hall
- 10 Human Resources Roundtable @Chamber
- 12 Final 2019 Breakfast Club @Assumption College
- 17 Seminar Series: Update on the New Federal Overtime Regulations @Chamber
- 19 Business After Hours @Lillie Mansion

2020: The Chamber's team is currently putting together a calendar of events for 2020 in addition to the below. Please check back with us in January for more information.

JANUARY

- 3 Third Annual Ambassador & Connect for Success Groups' New Year Mixer @O'Connor's Restaurant & Bar
- 23 Business After Hours @The Juicy Seafood
- 30 StartUp Worcester Open House & Demo Night @WCTI

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35 YEARS OF LIFE SCIENCE STARTUP COMPANIES AND COUNTING

By Jon Weaver, MBI president & CEO

Since its inception in 1985, Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives has upheld an “all about our companies” motto.

MBI supports early-stage, life-science companies in commercializing their science by providing lab space with unmatched affordability, business assistance, environmental health and safety support, and shared instrumentation access.

These companies include drug discovery and medical device firms as well as contract research organizations which provide services specific to the industry. Over the past 19 years, MBI has graduated 95 companies at a 77 percent success rate. The success rate is calculated by those businesses which remain in business for five years after vacating MBI. This high rate of success outgrowing the space is a credit to MBI's business model.

SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks to the leadership of MBI's former president and CEO, Kevin O'Sullivan, today MBI is well-positioned for success. Mr. O'Sullivan's leadership directly supported the development of the UMass Medicine Science Park, Redstone Center, and most recently, the Worcester Biomanufacturing Park – now known as the Reactory. A collaboration of the City of

Worcester's Economic Development Coordinating Council, the Worcester Business Development Corporation, and the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce along with MBI, the Reactory is a 46-acre biomanufacturing park located near AbbVie and the UMass Medical School in Worcester.

THE NEXT FRONTIER

In January, the MBI board of trustees recruited a new vice president, Zu Shen, Ph.D. and promoted myself from Chief Operating Officer to president and CEO. Prior to the transition, the management team worked with the board to develop a new three-year strategic plan which continues many successful programs and also expand the incubator operations and advocate for construction of a new business strategy initiative.

MBI's two Worcester facilities have been operating at approximately 99 percent occupancy for the past three years. As a result, MBI recently started construction on an incubator expansion project in Worcester's Gateway Park with the support of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center's Competitive Capital Grant.

The 25,000-square-foot project will more than double the current capacity of MBI's incubator operations and include laboratory options from 100 all the way up

to 3,000 square feet for early stage life science companies.

MBI will share the facility with Cogmedix – a growing medical device development and contract manufacturing company led by the Coghlin family in Worcester. Cogmedix represents a great synergy for MBI as it manufactures products for some of MBI's “graduate” companies and is a leader in the medical device space. Cogmedix will remain in the building while also expanding into a new facility in West Boylston.

OPPORTUNITY FOR WORCESTER

MBI has historically been a home for many tools, diagnostics, and contract research organizations. However, over the past few years, Worcester has seen a major influx of drug discovery companies. These high-growth companies have the potential to create a major

influx of jobs and investment to the city and MBI is supporting their growth.

To accommodate and retain the interest in the local sector, MBI recently created a new business strategy committee on the board to evaluate and mentor early-stage drug discovery companies. This committee is one of a series of additional new programs focused on fostering the growth of these businesses.

Providing an expansive and talented workforce, resources at nine local colleges and universities, not to mention access to Boston and Cambridge, Worcester is part of one of the world's greatest biotechnology clusters.

Be it biomanufacturing, contract research, or startup drug discovery, Worcester represents a great value proposition for the biotech industry.

RIGHT: MBI President & CEO Jon Weaver, center, with incubator company ZATA Pharmaceuticals at the New England Innovation Awards Pitch Competition. Photo courtesy MBI.



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CENTRAL MASS DIVERSITY, MANUFACTURING STRENGTH ON DISPLAY FOR CONSULS GENERAL

By Alex Guardiola, Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy

Eighteen consuls general from countries as far as Japan and as near as Canada, were welcomed by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce to tour the to tour the industrial strengths of Central Massachusetts Oct. 17. This visit took place in conjunction with the Massachusetts Office of Business Development as well as the Massachusetts Office of International Trade and Investment, or MOITI.

Showcasing the City of Worcester as not only a location for employers, but also touting its high quality of life, the focus was on diversity.

From the beginning, Worcester has been home to people from across the globe. Whether you are going to Shrewsbury Street to try some of the most authentic Italian cuisine or stopping at Golemo's Market on Millbury Street for some world class Polish Deli, Worcester is filled with culture.

Before arriving in Worcester, the group started the day off by visiting AIS in Leominster, a manufacturer of commercial office furniture, where they met CEO Bruce Platzman and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito. Mr. Platzman spoke of AIS' strategic and consolidating move to Leominster several years ago from six different locations around Boston. Relocating to the 600,000-square-foot facility enabled the company to put manufacturing and corporate operations under one roof. AIS had been courted by other states, and even Mexico, to move operations but Mr. Platzman – a native New Englander – wanted to remain in Massachusetts. The decision proved more than sentimental; it was a smart business move too.

"Manufacturing is an industry that matters" to residents of the Commonwealth, said Ms. Polito during the visit. She recounted the administration's recent focus on manufacturing, to the tune of more than \$100 million, stating "the most important piece of what is driving this economy in Massachusetts is our investment in people."

Next, the group traveled to Worcester and met with Jon Weaver, executive director of Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives to discuss its collaboration with Worcester Polytechnic Institute. A private, independent economic development organization serving as a catalyst for life science and healthcare innovation, MBI helps launch biomedical companies therefore creating jobs within the biotechnology, medical device, informatics, and biomanufacturing industry. They do so by providing secure, licensed laboratory space for use by seed-stage companies.

Since this tour's mission was to promote the City of Worcester as a place to work and live happily,

the DCU Center was a must. Lunch was provided giving delegates the opportunity to converse with City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. in a roundtable setting. Mr. Augustus discussed ongoing projects throughout the city and the strides Worcester has made in the last decade – most notably the future of Polar Park.

Worcester's top industry, in terms of employment, is health care and we would be remiss not to highlight the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Fitting for this tour, many of the UMass Medical School graduate students are international students and the school's brand is recognized globally.

At UMass, delegates got a sneak peek at the forward-thinking research conducted there by meeting with professors, students, and technicians. For one delegate, the biggest take away was quite a compliment. "This school has everything you need to succeed, and may be light years ahead of other, competing countries," she said.

In order to encompass all of Worcester, included was a stop at The Railers. Mike Meyers, president of the ECHL hockey team, welcomed the group to the Fidelity Bank Ice Center where guests were treated to Becker College women's hockey practice highlighting the inclusion of all the area colleges usage of the ice rink. There, we also met with Dan Rea, executive vice president for the soon-to-be Worcester Red Sox.

Speaking to the gathered delegates, Mr. Rea highlighted the fact that as a minor league team, many of the players hail from other countries. He impressed the group when he mentioned some of their countries as being part of the roster. For example, the Dominican Republic and Mexico.

Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Timothy P. Murray concluded the day with a send off at The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts. There, Mr. Murray gave a quick highlight of all the things Worcester has committed to in positioning itself as a destination for companies to plant roots.

"We have some of the best colleges in the country and lie just 45 minutes west of Boston," said Mr. Murray in his remarks to the gathering. "Not to mention, an airport with three commercial airlines that continues to grow in ridership and makes Worcester attractive in many respects."

Choosing Worcester as a showcase city for such a tour indicates the to the local that MOITI and businesses located inside the I-95 corridor are beginning to recognize what Worcester residents have known for years and an idea the Chamber touts daily – Worcester is the place to be for work and play. Stay tuned, this is just the beginning.

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HOMEGROWN, HOMEMADE, HOME-COMMITTED: MEET ED RUSSO

**By Dominique Goyette-Connerty,
Communications and Marketing
Associate**

What started as a vision for a deli and café – that would hopefully serve as a retirement plan – quickly turned into much more for Ed Russo, owner of Lock 50 Restaurant and Wine Bar and now Russo’s Italian Restaurant.

Mr. Russo got his start in the industry just four years ago when he opened Lock 50 – where he acted as general manager. Prior to that he owned Labex of MA, an industry-grade laboratory equipment firm. However, the new American, small plate restaurant on Water Street did so well, Mr. Russo was hooked. Russo’s followed in June 2019.

For the Worcester native, born and raised on Grafton Hill, the choice to open in the city – both restaurants are located on Water Street, tucked into the Canal District – was easy. Though he now resides in Leicester, Mr. Russo joked he “really only sleeps” there.

As far as success, the proof is in the pudding – or, in this case, meatballs. Utilizing his grandmother’s recipe, Mr. Russo tells tales of customers driving from afar just for the meatballs. “It’s a huge compliment,” he said.

In fact, many of the dishes on the restaurants’ menus are family recipes. And it is, after all, a family business. With his nephew, Timothy

Russo, serving as executive chef; his son, Sean, and his daughters helping out as well; Mr. Russo says, “when you walk in, you know.”

Between the two venues, Mr. Russo employs roughly 40 people.

Despite their similarity, both restaurants have distinct styles. Russo’s is “straight-up Italian-American” cuisine, as Mr. Russo puts it, with a priority on quality and “a price point that is approachable to everyone.” Lock 50, on the other hand, he describes as “contemporary American food” with a “more sophisticated” menu. Potato gnocchi is a customer favorite as well as their chef’s tasting menu and Mr. Russo envisions a separate dining room set aside for tastings in Lock 50.

One unifying factor of both brands is the quality of the dishes. “Everything’s homemade. The bread, pasta, pastrami,” said Mr.



ABOVE: Ed Russo, owner of Lock 50 and Russo’s Italian Restaurant. Photo courtesy Discover Central Mass, Erb Dufault Photography.

Russo, “even the ketchup and mustard are homemade.”

Yet, for Mr. Russo, “it’s not just our creative menu that sets us apart – it’s the creativity of the restaurant [concept],” he said, referencing the igloos dotting the Lock 50 patio during the winter months. These pop-up patio structures are “heated even in the middle of a snowstorm,” allowing customers to enjoy the outdoor space while protected from cold and wind.

Whether it’s the igloos, tiki nights, live music, special tastings, or other events, “we’re constantly doing different things,” he said.

Calling Mr. Russo a “major contributor to the city and to local tourism efforts,” Stephanie Ramey, executive director of Discover Central Massachusetts, said “he has a great vision and isn’t afraid to implement new tactics that spark curiosity and drive traffic to Worcester.”

Ms. Ramey added “bringing the igloos to Lock 50 was brilliant. People are craving new and unique experiences – enjoying a high-end dinner in this type of setting is truly amazing.”

According to Mr. Russo, the carefully crafted wine list makes dining at either Lock 50 or Russo’s a unique experience. The list, which he called “unique, balanced, and curated,” features representation from around the world including bottles from Italy, Lebanon, and Greece. “We’re not just a California-heavy selection ... we look for the best,” he said.

And his commitment to wine doesn’t stop with the two restaurants. Mr. Russo is a founding partner of the Worcester Wine Festival which

recently concluded its third year in September.

A weekend-long festival, the event is the result of a collaboration between Mr. Russo and MassFoodies and consists of a VIP dinner at Lock 50 on Friday night and a Grand Tasting held at Union Station on Saturday afternoon.

Dubbing it his “brain child,” Mr. Russo said the idea was inspired three years ago by Lock 50’s dedication to wine.

Since its inception, the festival has continued to grow and has “gotten bigger and better every year,” according to Mr. Russo. This year’s festival drew more than 1,500 people over the duration of the September weekend and featured 60 different vendors.

“Ed is the type of person who can identify a void and then immediately act to fill it – which is how the Worcester Wine Festival came to be. Anyone can see this event is a labor of love for him and all those involved,” said Ms. Ramey.

Of his involvement with the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Russo noted hosting a Business After Hours event at Lock 50 in 2017, receiving the Chamber’s Silver Hammer award for renovations to the Lock 50 building, sponsoring Chamber golf tournaments, and serving as a Game Changers hospitality panelist in 2016 among other participation. For him, the Chamber has been “great exposure.”

When asked with which endeavor he enjoys spending his time the most, Mr. Russo said: “I’m extremely proud of the quality of food and service we provide. ... When people walk out the door and tell me how great everything is, it’s a very proud moment for me.”

Not too long ago, Mr. Russo “never would have considered [himself] a player in the [hospitality] scene.” “However,” he revealed, “I still have a few ideas,” teasing his aspirations to eventually have at least one more restaurant in the Canal District.

“I’m a strong believer that when you put several restaurants together it benefits everyone. It doesn’t make it competitive. ... We all help one another.”



ABOVE: Lock 50’s wintertime, lighted igloos. Photo courtesy Discover Central Mass, Erb Dufault Photography.



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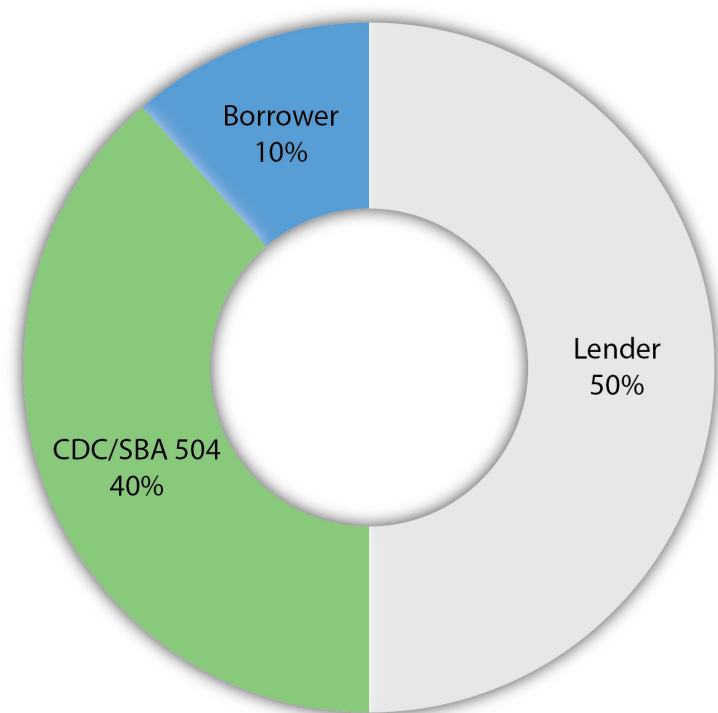
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CONNECTING LOCAL RESIDENTS WITH CAREER PATHWAYS

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty,
Communications and Marketing Associate

The Worcester Jobs Fund, a City of Worcester initiative designed to better connect city residents with career pathways, is continuing to grow their services and community impact after its launch more than three years ago.

Targeting minorities and individuals with previous employment obstacles WJF programming serves everyone from veterans to single parents, people of color, those with a past felony conviction, women, people with disabilities, and low-income residents.

"Our job is to create opportunities for local residents to learn the credentials needed to fill in-demand, living-wage positions," said Kelsey Lamoureux, WJF director.

"As local companies expand and [create] new employment opportunities, it's important that these opportunities are [accessible] to local residents," she said adding, "we want to make sure they have the skills necessary to really attain them."

During their first year in operation, WJF enrolled 65 low-income individuals in job training across four categories – building trades workers, commercial drivers, food production workers, and diesel technicians – 88 percent of whom completed the coursework. The average per-hour wage of that first cohort of WJF graduates was \$15.32 – more than \$5 above the 2016 Massachusetts minimum wage.

Most recently, during Fiscal Year 2019, the WJF served 77 participants with an 87-percent program completion rate. In the workforce, graduates earned an average \$16.70 per hour – more than \$4 above the current statewide minimum wage.

One such graduate was Nalla Mugisha who completed the commercial driver's license Class B program in April and has since been working for Atlas Distributing.

A recent transplant from Boston, Mr. Mugisha said he realized "there were opportunities [he] wasn't taking advantage of," after a visit to the MassHire Worcester Career Center on Main Street—where WJF is housed.

Ms. Lamoureux met with him, administered a short skills test, Mr. Mugisha was accepted to WJF's free, month-long program and on his way to obtaining a CDL B.

"Everyone at MassHire was very nice, especially Kelsey—she told me all about the program," reflected Mr. Mugisha on his experience. "I really respect them and everything they

do, they changed my life."

Because of his positive experience, Mr. Mugisha said whenever he gets the chance, "I tell everybody ... MassHire has a lot of opportunities, not just CDL."

In addition to increasing the number of graduates – since its inception, WJF has served a total of 224 clients – the organization continues to expand their programmatic offerings and the industries for which they train.

"One of the unique things about the WJF," said Ms. Lamoureux, "is that we respond to the labor market's needs in real time."

Building on their previous portfolio; which offered CDL A and B, Worcester Building Pathways, biomanufacturing, and culinary programs among others; WJF debuted EKG/phlebotomy and medical office administration trainings in FY

2019 in response to the growing healthcare industry demands in Worcester, said Ms. Lamoureux.

Noting the importance of hiring local, Ms. Lamoureux said recruiting within Worcester's backyard "builds a strong economy where wages are earned and spent in the city, provides residents access to good jobs in their community, and benefits employers through a diverse workforce."

WJF is overseen by a collaborative committee of representatives from the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, MassHire Worcester Career Center, MassHire Central Region Workforce Board, the Worcester Community Labor Coalition, and Worcester Public Schools. A significant portion of their responsibilities include outreach to local companies – especially those receiving tax incentives – to recruit their support as project partners and improve career pathways and placement.

The committee meets and engages with local employers and developers to discuss workforce needs, spread WJF awareness, and ultimately reinforce workforce pipelines – "especially for jobs created out of TIF plans," said Ms. Lamoureux. As a result, several employer-partners offer priority status for open positions to WJF participants upon graduation.

Starting this month, WJF will begin recruiting for their early spring programs including CDL class B, Worcester Building Pathways Pre-Apprenticeship, and medical office administration.

To learn more about the Worcester Jobs Fund, visit their webpage at <https://masshirecentralcc.com/worcester-jobs-fund>.

**"There are people
in Worcester
who are willing
to help and
I'm grateful
for that."**

- Nalla Mugisha

AFFILIATE CORNER: FOCUS ON WOMEN, HERE COME THE HOLIDAYS

**BLACKSTONE VALLEY CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE WOMEN'S
SUCCESS NETWORK**

By Patricia Hurton, *Women's Success Network Chair*

Created to encourage women in the workplace to come together in the spirit of collaboration and achieve their individual vision of success, the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce Women's Success Network's mission is to unite women in achieving their vision of success by creating a community of support and inspiration in their personal and professional lives.

In addition, the WSN provides opportunities to pursue growth and learning experiences by sharing experiences, challenges, and wisdom as well as networking.

"When you say chamber of commerce, many people think [strictly] business' environments, but that is too narrow," said Jeannie Hebert, president and CEO of the Blackstone Valley of Chamber of Commerce. "We aim to be more inclusive and reach out to women of various ages, in various levels of responsibility, across various professions."

Encouraging participation, Ms. Hebert cited a Kellogg School of Management study which found that "women who try to network like men ... do so less effectively

... because they are missing one crucial ingredient, a close inner circle of women."

She added: "The study revealed there is a need for that tight-knit female group because it provides critical information on job opportunities and challenges."

The WSN meets quarterly to present a variety of programs and events with workshops, speakers, social gatherings, and special programs requested by participants. In June, the WSN invited Rep. Hannah E. Kane, R-Worcester, who related her experiences as a mother, wife, businesswoman, and elected official.

The August meeting was an evening wine social and networking opportunity. Special guest and physic reader, Maria Sheehan offered readings.

In October, the format changed to a four-hour workshop, Find More Hours to Have Better Control, facilitated by Sandra Kearney, vice president of Westborough-based GROWTHco. Additional programs and events are planned for 2020.

Because of the growth of women-owned businesses in the Blackstone Valley, the WSN is focused on helping entrepreneurs via a series of programs, events, and resources designed to fit their unique needs.

This focus will help individuals avoid isolation and tackle

challenges by being part of a group with shared experiences and a forum to discuss and gain advice without judgment, said Ms. Hebert.

In addition to BVCC staff, the WSN has an executive committee of five women from various professions who share their personal and professional experiences and expertise. These women meet once a month and work collaboratively to identify, design, and coordinate the various initiatives.

For additional information, contact Jeannie Hebert, President and CEO at jhebert@blackstonevalley.org.

CELEBRATE HOLIDAY FUN AT FIVE WITH CENTRAL MASS SOUTH

Join the Chamber of Central Mass South for some holiday cheer with members and guests on the evening of Wednesday, Dec. 11 at 5:00 pm for the final Fun at Five.

A glittering celebration at The Publick House Historic Inn in Sturbridge, the networking event will feature food, a joyous atmosphere, many great prizes and surprises, a 50/50 raffle, and the opportunity to ring in the holiday season with fellow CMS Chamber members.

The final 2019 Fun at Five is sponsored by Cornerstone Bank. More information and registration is available at www.cmschamber.org.

UPCOMING AFFILIATE EVENTS

Auburn Chamber of Commerce

WHAT: 58TH Annual Meeting with keynote Ralph Crowley, president of Polar Beverages

WHEN: April 29, 2020 | 5 to 7 p.m.

WHERE: J. Anthony's (917 Southbridge St., Auburn, Mass.)

**Blackstone Valley Chamber
of Commerce**

WHAT: 41ST Annual Meeting "Global Leaders Recognize Local Innovation"

WHEN: Nov. 26, 2019
7 to 10 a.m.

WHERE: Pleasant Valley Country Club (95 Armsby Rd., Sutton, Mass.)

**Wachusett Area Chamber
of Commerce**

WHAT: Spotlight on Tuscany Tour

WHEN: April 2 to 10, 2020
Seven Nights, One Hotel

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<https://wachusettareachamber.org/travel/tuscany/>

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LW ALUMNI NETWORK AIMS TO STAY COMMITTED, CONNECTED

By Kim Davenport (LW '18)
and Ryan Matson (LW '18),
Correspondents

Leadership is never about any one person. But together, we have the capacity and responsibility to lead and transform our community.

Relaunched in 2015, Leadership Worcester is a unique community leadership development program, run by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Worcester Community Foundation. It's a call to action for young professionals providing an opportunity to gain insight into the city, build knowledge of different forms of leadership, and forge new connections in the community.

The current LW class is the fifth cohort and, come May, there will be more than 125 graduates from 70-plus employers eager to continue meeting, learning, and serving.

Members are enthusiastic to connect and advance the visions created during their participation – which is why an LW Alumni Network was launched last month. More than 60 alumni attended the first meet and greet where they committed to building the network together. The event, generously hosted by Joe Salois, president and CEO of Atlas Distributing, Inc., featured time to reconnect, meet other alumni, and hear inspirational comments from Timothy P. Murray, Chamber president and CEO; Mr. Salois, LW Selection Committee chairman; and

Barbara Fields, a Leadership Rhode Island alumna, and GWCF president and CEO.

Mr. Salois commented on the alumni's unique character saying: "The camaraderie and care they have for one another [makes them] a collegial group who embrace Worcester and value the importance of being involved."

While she knows the impact of the program first-hand, Ms. Fields is excited to learn more about LW. She said: "Our role at the foundation is two-fold: we work to build a stronger community and improve people's lives. LW positions us to do both."

LW alumni look to build on the strengths of the city and not shy away from the work necessary to make it more inclusive, more equitable, and a vibrant community in which to live, work, and play. Initial activities of the alumni network include volunteering, hosting lunch and learns with leaders from across the city, and networking to strengthen bonds among fellow alumni. Once established, the group aims to raise the program's visibility. "I believe the LW Alumni Network provides graduates a continued point of contact with a broader group of individuals committed to personal and professional growth as well as a sense of civic responsibility," said Mr. Murray. "What inspires me, is all things they will accomplish." Applications to join the next cohort, the Class of 2020-21, are due in May.

SUCCESS, FROM PAGE 1

And, it's not only the world-class neighboring amenities drawing LLB employees to Worcester.

"As architects, we're always looking for spaces in which we can make a difference," said Ms. Lombardo. "Worcester has an amazing amount of diversity, a rich architectural history, and stock of historic buildings."

The "activity" in municipal, higher education, and biotech sectors are "incredibly aligned with LLB's [portfolio]," she added regarding the reason for expansion.

Brianna Goodrow, co-owner of DiBella Studios, isn't surprised by the interest shown by LLB and blumshapiro employees. A Worcester native, she returned to the area because of its low cost of living and vibe.

"There's a lot to do, cultural institutions in the city keep my calendar full," said the owner of the Worcester-based marketing and events firm.

Herself a young creative, Ms. Goodrow is the epitome of the talent sought by companies citywide. With existing clients across the country as well as regionally in New York City and Boston, she and her husband/business partner searched for a city large enough to draw fellow creative talent and support their eight-month-old business.

Worcester's status as the second-largest city in New England "made a difference," she said.

"I love that we can own a home here," said Ms. Goodrow. "That wasn't an affordable option elsewhere." In five years, she plans to have a young child and support a staff in Worcester, "this is it for me," she added.

OPPORTUNITY LEADS TO COMMUNITY

Priced out of many regional metropolitan areas, Travis Duda and his wife landed in Worcester where they found "more bang for [their] buck" and purchased a home. Bringing with him his previously side-gig graphic design company, Hunchback Graphics, Mr. Duda said the growth he's experienced – including designs for the upcoming Polar Park – would not have been possible elsewhere.

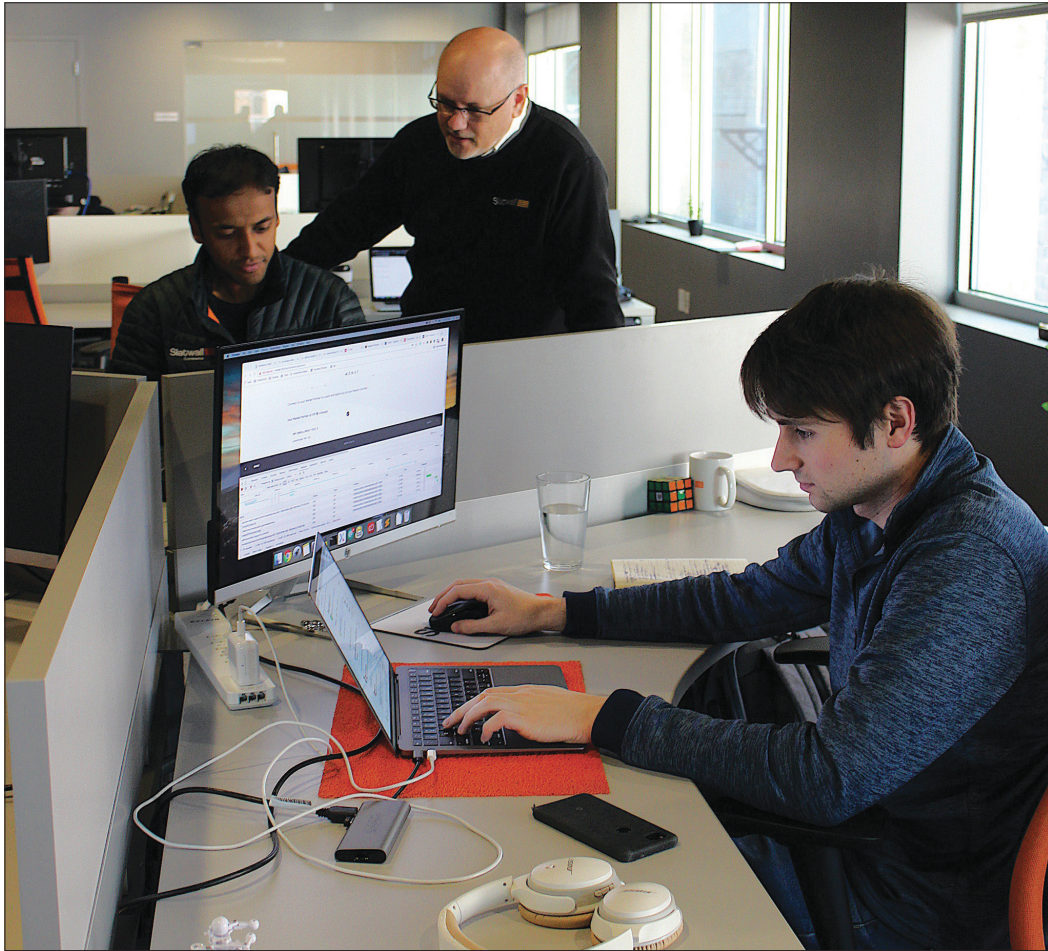
Working in MetroWest, "I was taking clients wherever I could find them," said Mr. Duda. After moving to Worcester, "I got a local opportunity followed by another and another and I stopped pursuing outside work."

The connections he's made are more than business-to-business transactions. "I've never felt as connected to a place as I do in Worcester. I've found my people – a bunch of working-class, hard-nosed people," said Mr. Duda.

Expressing a similar affinity for the people of the city, said Michael Feldman, president and CEO of Feldman Land Surveyors, it was the

fact that he could run into a high-level executive on his way to lunch one afternoon, a true story, that sealed the deal.

"Even though we're an established business," he said, in Worcester, "it feels like we're doing fun startup [work]. However, because we're not a startup, we can talk to people" about programming we've perfected over years.

GETTING IN ... AND OUT

LEFT: David Crouch (center) with ten24 employees Dilip Francis, a lead architect (left), and Storm Rockwell, a front end developer (right), at the company's downtown headquarters. Photo by Emily Gowdey-Backus.

April 9. Associate Steven J. Tyler, said the firm had previously found it difficult to grow business outside Boston without a brick and mortar presence.

Eight months later, he said Worcester is "without a doubt" fertile ground for small to medium businesses looking to expand across the Commonwealth or launch in a less expensive city.

Thanks to the fanfare surrounding

the imminent arrival of the Red Sox Triple A affiliate team and the improvements to the I-495/I-90 interchange, the firm counts six new municipal clients and three new hires among their top achievements after nearly a year.

CAPACITY? NOT IN SIGHT

LLB Architects' Ms. Lombardo is encouraged more firms will look to Worcester and follow in this cohort's footsteps.

"For us, there wasn't a lot of competition" in Worcester compared to the "much denser" presence of architectural industries in Boston and Providence, she said.

In the spirit of creating additional competitive markets, Ms. Lombardo said there is still a lot of dependence on Boston across multiple industries in Worcester.

Calling on mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineers to look west, she said "I bet if they open here in Worcester, they would make a killing."

JOBS MATTER

Businesses create them!

- ▶ Worcester has lost more than 700 manufacturing jobs to surrounding towns over the past five years.
- ▶ During that same 5-year period, a majority of the current Worcester city councilors have voted to increase the tax burden on Worcester businesses.
- ▶ The Worcester city council recently adopted a program to attract businesses to 44 vacant store fronts in just one section of the city.
- ▶ Some city councilors say the tax rate does not impact a businesses decision about where to locate.

Yet, here's what one company said in August in the METROWEST DAILY NEWS when it made the decision to locate to Westborough with 400 jobs:

“Christopher Egan, president of Carruth Capital LLC, said it is the first major office project to be built along I-495 in the area since the 2008 recession. *‘Olympus picked the site because Westborough has a fair single tax rate.’* he said.”

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to let them know that jobs matter and businesses create them!



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TRAVEL THE WORLD WITH FLAVORS OF LOCAL CHOCOLATE COMPANY

By Emily Gowdey-Backus, Director of Communications

For most of us, chocolate is already a gift from the heavens, but Robert Nalbandov elevates the delicacy by adding spices from across the world.

From spicy-cardamom and apricots to cherry-mahleb and hemp seeds to chai, ChokoSpice allows you to travel around the world in just one bite.

Growing up in the Republic of Georgia, formerly part of the Soviet Union, Mr. Nalbandov's childhood did not feature the sweets and treats prevalent in the U.S. But it was through his

grandmother's 1,000-page cookbook that he learned about chocolate desserts.

"Even before I could read I was shuffling pages," he said. "There were drawings of chocolate cakes and fountains."

Today, he owns ChokoSpice, a member of the Worcester Regional Food Hub, and produces nine unique flavors of spiced chocolate. With each bar retailing for \$6 online and \$4 wholesale, the ChokoSpice portfolio features an 84-percent dark bar; roasted seaweed; dark Szechuan-peppercorn and organic dried Cape Cod cranberry; and dark orange, coffee, and turmeric bars.

Commenting on the complexity of his spice pairings, Mr. Nalbandov said: "You cannot gorge on our chocolate or quench your hunger." Rather, he suggested, "shave the bar and add hot milk" creating a seasonal beverage.

"We've tried to embrace different regions in our selection of spices," said Mr. Nalbandov naming Asian, Indian, eastern European, and Mediterranean influences among his ingredient list. In addition, he sources his cacao beans from the Dominican Republic and cacao butter from Peru.

Specifically noting the organization's "more affordable" pricing and larger space, the delicate nature of their chocolate is why Mr. Nalbandov signed up with the Food Hub.

A food aggregator and distributor, the Worcester Regional Food Hub was born out of a partnership between the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, Regional Environmental Council, and The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts. Over the last four years, the organization has helped food entrepreneurs establish their businesses, gain ServSafe and wholesale certification, brand and market their products, and distribute among the local community.

"We went to different commercial kitchens with people making juices, roasting quiches, and making shakes [simultaneously,]" he said. "Chocolate is something that



ABOVE: Robert Nalbandov, owner and founder of ChokoSpice at the Worcester Regional Food Hub. Photo courtesy Jesika Theos Photography.

absorbs smells and flavors like a sponge. I needed to have individual time."

The Food Hub, "is small enough not to combine multiple food making processes and large enough to satisfy a single process."

Having not yet celebrated its first year in business, ChokoSpice was launched in January. Mr. Nalbandov's initial batch was sold one month later followed in March by his first wholesale account – Au Chocolat on High Street in Boston.

Locally, ChokoSpice is sold at Ed Hyder's Mediterranean Marketplace, Acoustic Java, and Electric Haze among other purveyors.

As of late September, Mr. Nalbandov counted between 25 and 30 active wholesale accounts as well as online sales via the Food Hub's distribution arm.

What sets ChokoSpice apart from other bars on confectionary aisle shelves, said Mr. Nalbandov, is the pure form of chocolate they use as a base and its simple packaging.

"Our company gives you directly what it is, spiced chocolate," he said. For most of the bars, the ingredient list is four items long – cacao beans and butter, sugar, and the spices listed in the name.

After 11 months of sales, Mr. Nalbandov said the majority of his customers are 40-plus years old with half of that demographic being senior citizens. While he thought younger people in their twenties and thirties would be his base, he's found they often "unconsciously group chocolate into a forbidden pleasure."

Looking forward, Mr. Nalbandov said the persistent challenge in his work is finding a way to correctly temper chocolate en masse.

"Chocolate is a capricious little creature," he said of chosen medium.

However, Mr. Nalbandov is encouraged by the possibility of new flavors and seasonal additions to the ChokoSpice portfolio. He hopes to offer a German mulled-wine bar for the holidays.

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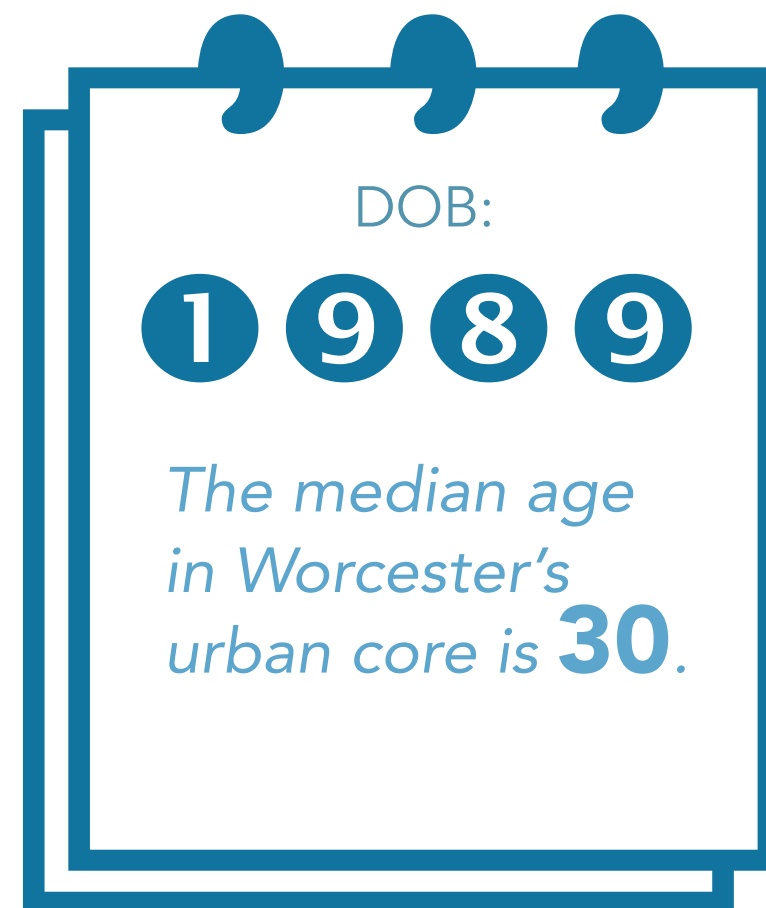
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EARLY PHASES OF HOUSING STUDY SHOW NEED FOR INVESTMENT, REDEVELOPMENT OF AGING INFRASTRUCTURE

By Emily Gowdey-Backus, Director of Communications

Whether your kitchen window has views of Wachusett Mountain or the soon-to-be-completed Polar Park, we all enjoy calling the Heart of the Commonwealth home.

However, securing sufficient affordable housing has evolved into a crisis across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Worcester is not immune. In fact, the city's residences rank among the top-10 oldest across the United States.

Released last month, the first two phases of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's housing study helped identify multiple key strategies which local businesses can utilize to strengthen their bond not only

to the community but to employees and their families as well as their local customer base.

First, employer incentive housing programs are a win-win for employees and employers alike. Ensuring workers have safe, housing close to their place of work breeds loyalty.

One successful example is well underway in Central Mass. In Worcester's Main South neighborhood, Clark University faculty and staff are eligible to receive \$5,000 toward closing costs if they purchase a home within that neighborhood, of which the school is a part. To-date, 31 Clark employees have taken advantage of the program.

Multiple examples of employer incentive housing programs are outlined in the study. Central Mass employers should look to these

models when outlining talent recruitment and retention strategies.

Currently under debate on Beacon Hill, Massachusetts House Bill No. 177 targets \$750,000 at housing improvements in Gateway Cities like Worcester. If passed, the bill will also establish a commission to oversee advancing aging infrastructure across the Commonwealth to building codes in a cost-effective manner.

Doubling down on the importance the local housing sector plays in public health and safety, not to mention building wealth among younger residents, the City of Worcester announced a multi-part campaign in which property owners are encouraged to invest in their holdings – especially characteristic triple deckers that line so many Worcester streets.

In partnership with multiple local financial institutions, the city has set up a \$10 million loan fund to aid those looking to purchase or rehabilitate two- to four-unit buildings.

In addition, up to \$50,000 per unit will be available via Community Development Block Grants for both developers looking to purchase in the city as well as preexisting owners pursuing renovations.

"Worcester for Everyone," the Chamber's housing study, is meant to be just that – an inclusive strategy designed to bring together residents, employers, and government entities to solve an issue plaguing residents and the economy. Please take time to read it and find ways to implement the best practices and suggestions among your staff and community.



worcesterchamber.org/worcesterforeveryone

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TAXATION, FROM PAGE 1

pro forma.”
Mr. Murray said those communities are growing wise to Worcester’s tax stalemate. Several Central Massachusetts towns and cities that had previously opted for dual tax rates are now transitioning to single rates. In a nearly unanimous 2018 vote, the Fitchburg City Council voted to transition to a single rate over 10 years. Webster previously operated on a dual rate before opting for the reverse. Yet, similar to Worcester, Clinton and Auburn remain on dual rates. However, select boards in those towns have voted to and begun the process of gradually moving to a single rate.

DUAL TAX RATE CAUSES EXITS

The dual tax rate is a factor in companies choosing whether to stay in Worcester or leave. Several recent departures underscore Mr. Murray’s long-held concern.

When Primetals Technologies Ltd. wanted to expand in Worcester after more than 100 years in the city, there were scant pre-permitted pad-ready sites. Primetals, and its 325 jobs, departed for Sutton in 2018 and a renovated 183,000-square-foot site at \$16.52 per \$1,000 assessed tax rate. An added bonus, the firm received a tax increment financing deal – an argument often used by Worcester city council for reasons businesses locate here.

Commercial owner retention has suffered in Worcester. In the last few years alone, Curtis Industries moved from Higgins Industrial

Park in Worcester to West Boylston along with Cogmedix, both taking hundreds of jobs as a result of their need to expand to newer, more modern space.

One of the main reasons for the lack of pad-ready sites, said Mr. Murray, is that some Worcester property owners refuse to reinvest in parcels because there’s no incentive to do so without a signed lease in hand thanks to Worcester’s high commercial tax rate. For example, the long-dormant former U.S. Steel site at 150 Blackstone Rd. was eventually redeveloped by GFI Partners. However, renovations of the 632,000-square-foot facility only occurred after anchor tenants were secured and Worcester gave a tax increment financing plan, or TIF. In attracting those firms, GFI offered new tenants, such as Imperial Distributors, a lease including relocation of 300 employees from Auburn in spring 2017, as well as a tax increment financing deal.

“It’s a two-headed monster,” said Mr. Murray. “U.S. Steel was an exception rather than the rule. The dual tax rate is antithetical to growing your commercial and industrial tax base. It impedes growth and particularly hurts manufacturing and research and development companies.”

John Killam, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, said the loss of not only companies but also manufacturing jobs from Worcester deeply impacts the middle sector

of the economy as many other hidden service-oriented firms lose contracts and work as the result of a relocating client.

“We’re missing the economic impact these manufacturers make within the community. For every manufacturing job in a community, two to three other non-related jobs in the economic ecosystem are created,” said Mr. Killam listing restaurants “even taxi cabs.”

Calling the industry and “economic generator,” he added: “When we hear arguments over the dual tax rate, we’re not capturing the other jobs that will be affected [and] aren’t directly associated with that relocating company.”

SOLUTIONS ABOUND

A March 2017 Worcester Regional Research Bureau report found setting city tax rates is often “not a fact-based policy decision.” The report calls for development of criteria and a strategic approach that would encourage the city council to put forth its own rate proposals.

While working to mitigate financial challenges during the transition to a single rate, the Bureau’s white paper offered two strategies with a basic formula tracking changes in both residential and commercial/industrial rates. The first idea explores setting a pre-determined transitional period to a single rate while the second “buffers” residential payers by freezing current commercial/industrial property contributions. As a safety

measure, both proposals emphasize the potential for city councilors to slow or increase the transition based on annual economic indicators.

Certified Enrolled Agent Gary M. Gaffin; owner of Gary M. Gaffin Accounting, Inc., a 21-year-old accounting practice on Park Avenue, believes city councilors’ continuous renewal of the dual tax rate is not only unfair to larger employers, but also small businesses like his who employ micro staffs and are the backbone of the city’s economy. In particular, Mr. Gaffin strongly argued against his own District 5 Worcester City Councilor Gary Rosen’s point that a single tax rate would adversely affect the elderly living on fixed incomes.

“My office manager is 83 years old and by raising my taxes, I can’t afford to give her a raise,” he said, adding that state employee health care cost increases combined with the city’s ongoing tax rate hikes can mean the difference in hiring a full-time employee or a temporary worker.

Mr. Gaffin pays roughly \$1,600 per quarter in commercial/industrial taxes and has heavily invested in renovating his building, which he believes attracts more business and consumers to Park Avenue.

Mr. Murray agreed, adding that the Chamber’s public advocacy on this issue has largely been unsuccessful over recent years.

“We’ve gone backwards,” he said. “With the makeup of this council ... we can see their votes have been a factor in many of these exits.”



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CITY EMPLOYMENT DATA SHOWS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION INVESTMENT

**By Emily Gowdey-Backus,
Director of Communications**

Ten months after the latest update of the City of Worcester's affirmative action plan, signs show city employment diversifying and increasingly reflecting the population it serves.

"We have seen incremental progress not only in the amount of people of color but also in succession planning" regarding retirement and either promoting from within or external hiring, said Suja Chacko, Chief Diversity Officer for the city.

The progress reported by city officials builds on four-plus decades of affirmative action policy, but a more recent push to reflect residents among 016 zip codes is effectuating change. In fact, city data shows a nearly-4-percent increase overall in employment of people of color since 2012 – a rise from 188 to 289. Fourteen of 21 city departments, per city data, have increased diversity between 2012 and 2019.

City departments which have seen the greatest year-over-year percent growth are human resources, workforce development, and auditing.

The crux of the plan's future, said Ms. Chacko is support. "From a business mindset, you can have the numbers, but are you inclusive," she stated. Less data-driven results are also apparent in such efforts

as women- and LGBTQ-focused affinity groups; translation of official documents; and an internal audit of recruitment, retention, and hiring.

For City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., diversity and inclusion is about reflecting the city's populace. A successful diversity and inclusion strategy, founded in affirmative action, is when "anybody who lives in Worcester can see themselves as a police officer, a firefighter, or a commissioner."

In years past, said Mr. Augustus, two factors creating what often looked like a homogenized workforce: a decentralized human resources presence and nepotism.

While the second-largest city in New England, Worcester residents know the city can feel familiar among multi-generation families, long-standing communities, or personal networks.

"I don't know if it's cronyism or if I'm being polyannish, but it's human nature," he said. "It's natural to want to give somebody a head's up [and] I don't see that as being nefarious." However, he added, "if the formal system isn't counterbalancing that by doing opportunity fairs at the diverse churches and organizations in the community, you're never going to counterbalance it."

Today, while commendable, said Mr. Augustus, nepotism cannot play a role in hiring.

"People are used to doing things

they've always done and are comfortable with doing things a certain way, ... but what we're trying to do is to take as much of the subjectivity out of the process," he said.

He hopes the city's efforts to focus on affirmative action, diversity, and reaching out to previously-underserved sectors via a boots-on-the-ground presence in cultural organizations will result in a larger volume of applications for city jobs from a broader spectrum of residents.

"When more people apply you're going to find that woman candidate, that minority candidate, or that LGBTQ candidate," he said, "but a lot of times they don't know about that opportunity."

Ms. Chacko wants to amplify awareness. A Houston native, she said certain neighborhoods, including Main South, remind her of the Texas city in the 1980s and encourage her for the future.

Working with Ghanaian churches, the Southeast Asian Coalition, the YWCA, and the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce among other local organizations, she and her team work to disseminate the message about city employment throughout all communities.

She is careful, however, to partner with such organizations rather than double their efforts.

Envisioning an increasingly diverse



ABOVE: Suja Chacko is chief diversity officer for the City of Worcester. Photo courtesy Ms. Chacko.

city population, Mr. Augustus reiterated the importance of a strong, balanced affirmative action plan. He said: "Cities that succeed and thrive are cities that embrace diversity, that are open and welcoming."

And in order to achieve that success, the entire workforce system needs to uphold the goals of the affirmative action plan, said Ms. Chacko. "I may be charged with spearheading it," she added, but "we are all beholden to diversity and inclusion."

MAKING BUSINESS DREAMS A REALITY, WITH MICRO LOANS

**By Dominique Goyette-Connerty,
Communications and
Marketing Associate**

Lemon poppy seed muffins, buttery croissants, chocolate chip cookies, and gallons of cold brew cost more than the small debit transaction you make every morning at your favorite café.

In purchasing Crust Artisan Bakeshop on Main Street in Worcester, owner Alexis Kelleher turned to a local funding program to keep the community in caffeine and delightful pastries.

Together with the North Central Massachusetts Development Corp., the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

offers a microloan program providing loans of up to \$50,000 for Worcester-based startups or small businesses that may have difficulty securing traditional financing. Opened in 2014 by Armsby Abbey owners Alec Lopez and Sherri Sadowski, Ms. Kelleher, a Worcester native, started out as an employee at the 118 Main St. bakeshop.

After roughly 18 months displaying her knowledge and passion for the craft, Mr. Lopez and Ms. Sadowski asked her to purchase the company. A graduate of the New England Culinary Institute, Ms. Kelleher's passion for baking is widely known and she always wanted to own her own bakery – doing so was a different story.

Sandie Cataldo, manager of economic development at the North Central Massachusetts Development Corp., said three reasons business owners like Ms. Kelleher may be denied traditional financing can be any combination of a challenging or low credit score, lack of collateral, or a lack of business history.

"A lot of banks and credit unions don't usually work with startups," said Ms. Cataldo. "They would rather see someone with a bit of history – someone more viable." In other words, clients who are more likely to pay back the loans.

And many of the microloan program's clients learn of the opportunity after being turned down by commercial loan officers. This was the case for Crust. Recognizing she didn't have much personal equity or collateral, "I fell a little short," when applying for a traditional loan at the bank, said Ms. Kelleher who was 26 at the time.

Aware of how much she would need to purchase the business, and factoring in operations costs as well as additional "buffer room," the turn down came as a "bit of a shock" explained Ms. Kelleher.

"The microloan program was great because it helped me fill in that gap," she said. The microloan "was integral" for Ms. Kelleher to take



ABOVE: Crust Artisan Bakeshop Owner Alexis Kelleher (left) with boyfriend Nate Rossi. The two also own neighboring North Main Provisions. Photo by Dominique Goyette-Connerty.

ownership of Crust. "It was the only way," she said.

The purchase took place Jan. 17, 2017 and today, Ms. Kelleher employs a combination of 10 part-time and full-time employees.

Although the microloan program cannot lend to nonprofits or investment businesses, a wide array of industries are eligible. From food trucks, grocery stores, and bakeries, to hair salons, dog groomers, and clothing boutiques – "the list goes on and on," said Ms. Cataldo. And the bakeshop isn't the only small, Worcester-based business that has enlisted the help of the program. PAGEBOY Inc. Hair Salon on Harding Street is also the recipient of such funding.

The microloan program also provides technical assistance to clients.

Ms. Kelleher attests to these added benefits saying North Central Massachusetts Development Corp. representatives; including Ms. Cataldo and Norman Vigeant, vice president of lending; continue to be a resource whether its additional programming, lectures, or free sessions with their accountant.

Continuing to meet with the lenders to review progress and provide updates, Ms. Kelleher feels a similar connection nearly three years later.

"Every day is a learning curve when you're a small business owner," she said. "There's a lot working against you – or it feels like that sometimes," but the microloan program's assistance, guidance, and additional tools make the difference.

Comparing running her small business to raising a child, Ms. Kelleher joked: "It takes a village." According to Ms. Cataldo, since the organization's inception in 1996, the microloan program has lent nearly \$7 million to more than 145 businesses. The partnership with the Worcester Chamber began in January 2017.

Visit <https://www.worcesterchamber.org/economic-development/financing-micro-loans/> to learn more.

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FIVE THINGS CAREGIVERS NEED TO KNOW TO SUCCEED

**By Dr. Gerald Gleich,
Correspondent**

When you step in to help someone you care about – whether they are chronically ill, have a disability, or need supervision and support because of advancing dementia – it can feel good. You know you're making a difference when you help them with household chores, drive them to appointments, ensure they get the medications and treatments they need, and even help fulfill their wish to live at home as independently as possible.

Ninety-five percent of caregivers say the experience is worthwhile, according to a 2017 survey by The Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. But more than three quarters of participants described caregiving as stressful or time consuming and the remainder most likely had rough days too.

Whether you're a caregiver now or expect to be in the future, these are five things that can help.

Caregiving is stressful, but you can learn to manage that stress.

Caregivers often fall into a cycle of depression and stress. More stress leads to more depression, which in turn reduces the ability to deal with stress. Paying attention to your own emotional health is crucial to having the capacity to continue your work as a caregiver.

- Making time for yourself is a great way to manage stress, and it's essential for every caregiver. You need to have time off from your caregiver role to decompress and reenergize. Even short breaks, when someone takes over for 10–20 minutes, can give you the time and space to perhaps close your eyes and breathe deeply—or take a quick walk outside.

- Practicing mindfulness is another way to manage stress. Being mindful means taking time to recognize and appreciate what is happening now. Mindfulness helps us be in the moment instead of always rushing and worrying about the next task.

Taking care of your physical health really is important.

Caregivers often put their personal health needs on the back burner to focus on caring for a loved one. Pay attention to your own health. Ignoring it and becoming sick yourself may make you unable to continue the work of caregiving.

- Don't skip medical appointments, medications, or health screenings. They're important for maintaining and improving your health.
- Get regular exercise. Add more physical activity to your daily routine. Even small increases in activity boost your self-esteem, reduce your risks for getting a chronic disease, and decrease stress levels.

You'll need help. Don't be afraid to reach out to find it. Your friends and family may offer help that isn't helpful. Or they may not offer at all – maybe they think you've got everything under control – or they may not know how to help. And

others may worry that you'll ask them to do something that makes them feel uncomfortable.

- Ask for help. Start by asking for something small.
- Be specific with your request. Let your friend know what you need help with, what's involved, and how much time it will take. Specifics make it easier for you to ask and easier for others to accept or counter.
- Call your local Council on Aging or Elder Services Agency. They have extensive resources for – and experience with – caregiving.
- Speak to your loved one's health professionals. Let them know what your challenges are. They may have a solution or at least an idea that could make the situation easier.

Caregiving can affect

relationships. Friends can make themselves scarce when they think you are too stressed or busy. Family members may have different ideas about how to care for mom or dad, and old family roles and arguments can get in the way of working together. Nurturing and maintaining friendships and family relationships may take effort and if you're the primary caregiver you may have to be the one to take the lead.

- Invite friends and family to get together. It could be for breakfast, a walk, or just an at-home visit. Ask them to bring the food. You won't have to worry about it and they will feel good about helping.

- Communicate. Let your friends and family know what's going on and remind them you and your loved one want to stay in touch and help is appreciated.

It's easy to get so involved in caregiving that you feel isolated and alone. Don't push people away. Make an effort to socialize and get any help you need to stay connected to others.

- Call your friends. Even if they've never been caregivers, they can provide important support.

- Connect with other caregivers. They'll understand what you're going through in a way others won't. If you don't know any, join a support group in your community or online.

- Reach out to friends and family. They may have initially offered to support you, but have you taken them up on it? Don't wait. Call.
- Talk to a therapist. A therapist can help you manage the feelings and stresses of being a caregiver. Remember, to those on the outside, you may seem to be handling the situation well – so well you don't need friends and family. Let them know about the challenges you are facing, so they can help.

Dr. Gerald Gleich is a geriatrician medical director for Fallon Health's NaviCare program, a senior care options/medicare advantage special needs plan. He's an associate professor of family medicine and community health at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and medical director at St. Mary Health Care Center in Worcester.

The Joy Guru Humanitarian Services donated 170 turkeys to underprivileged students at six WPS schools as well as the Nativity School.

DURING THE HOLIDAYS, CENTRAL MASS BUSINESSES GIVE BACK AND BENEFIT FROM MULTIPLE FORMS OF GENEROUS PHILANTHROPY.

The holidays can be overwhelming for children with Autism. So, **HMEA** invites those under 12 who are on the spectrum, and their families, to a sensory-friendly celebration. Santa hands out gifts and takes photos in a sensory-friendly environment while guests enjoy a nice meal.

A portion of the proceeds from **The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts'** Dec. 19 showing of "A Christmas Carol" will benefit the **Worcester Community Action Council**.

This year, the **Chamber** is collecting hats, mittens, gloves, and scarves for children in **The CASA Project**. Donations will be gathered at the **December Business After Hours**.

Throughout the year, school and medical supplies are collected by the **Seven Hills Foundation** for dispersal in eight nations across the globe.

Everything from clothes to books and toys are listed on the **United Way of Central Massachusetts'** annual wish list. But, if you only have your time to give that works too. Find out more at unitedwaycm.org.

Each holiay season, **YOU, Inc.** staffers collect holiday gifts and donations to help make the season brighter for roughly 1,000 local children.

Donations of cake, and money, are made throughout the year by new franchise **Nothing Bundt**

MEET STARTUP WORCESTER: PHENIC NATURAL SKIN CARE; 2018-19, 2019-20



CO-FOUNDERS:
Sophia El Hayek,
Alexandra Haigis

COMPANY: Phenic
Natural Skin Care

AGES: 29, 28
respectively

HOMETOWNS:
Leominster; New
Ipswich, N.H.;
respectively

**FAVORITE
WORCESTER BITES:**
BirchTree, Coney Island

**FAVORITE DOWN
TIME LOCATION:**
Worcester Cleantech
Incubator

LEFT: Alexandra Haigis
(left), Sophia El Hayek
(right).

**By Emily Gowdey-Backus,
Director of Communications**

When mapped, big cosmetics and skin care firms don't have a very large footprint in Massachusetts, let alone Central Massachusetts. Memories of acne and a family recipe may change that.

Schoolmates, Sophia El Hayek and Alexandra Haigis attended Saint Bernard's Central Catholic High School before perfecting their business plan at Assumption College and co-founding Phenic Natural Skin Care in April.

Growing up, Ms. El Hayek said she experienced "really bad skin" and bounced from product to product trying to curate a regimen that would help decrease her acne and improve the health of her skin. Continuing her interest, and research of, the cosmetics and beauty industries through her college tenure, she enlisted Ms. Haigis to help build a sustainable, all-natural brand and market it to millennials and GenZ'ers.

While Ms. Haigis did not experience the same skin issues, she said the products she did purchase to treat her skin and maintain moisture were designed to "cause [her] to use more."

With the launch of Phenic Natural Skin Care, she said, "I wanted to make a skin care line that didn't have chemicals, was cleaner, and would help the user in the long run."

The recipe is one passed down from generation to generation among the members of Ms. El Hayek's Lebanese family. In true oral history fashion, when Ms. El Hayek and Ms. Haigis decided to mass produce the age-old recipe they had to start from scratch in more than one way.

"The recipe was just ingredients. We had to figure out the percentages," said Ms. El Hayek. "That's how you know it's a really old family recipe."

What makes Phenic Natural Skin Care stand out among a litany of cosmetic and beauty products, said Ms. El Hayek, is the inclusion of squalene oil derived from olives.

Found in olives and sugar cane, among other sources, Ms. El Hayek

called it a "star ingredient" and the base of much of their five-item product line.

"Instead of sitting on the surface [of your skin], it gets absorbed really well which is good for hydration and aging," she said. "It restores the natural moisture in your skin and doesn't feel like a super thick product."

Both in their late twenties, the brand born out of home trials and family friend reviews has already made an impact on the regional scene. The pair were selected to exhibit at the highly-competitive Beautycon event in New York the month they announced the business. A bi-annual cosmetics and beauty sector exposition, Beautycon is held in Los Angeles and New York City in the United States.

Proud of the New York invitation and impact they made during the event, Ms. El Hayek said: "Our product is very relevant right now because [of] its simple ingredients, there are no chemicals. I'm happy with where we are in the industry right now."

Participants in both the 2018-19 and 2019-20 Startup Worcester cohorts, the two women found the program while searching for commercial space to mass produce their products. A partnership between the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, Venture Forum, SCORE, and Worcester CleanTech Incubator, the program's mission is to help launch and house the city's next generation of entrepreneurs.

"We were doing this on our own, in a bubble" of friends and family, said Ms. El Hayek. Looking back at their selection by Beautycon and ensuing awareness, they credited the mentoring and physical incubation space with "that first push" as a startup, said Ms. El Hayek.

Moving forward, operating from what the pair agree is a more affordable city than New York or Los Angeles, the founders hope to grow out-of-state awareness while attracting venture capital.

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FLOWERS MAKE IT ALL BETTER

**By Charlene Arsenault,
Correspondent**

While their flower shop is just six months old, Edwin Ramirez and Julia Portillo share a goal – to be the "best" florist in the City of Worcester. And, they want to do so in the next five years.

"We want to bring the best quality flowers to the residents of the City of Worcester," said Mr. Ramirez administrator and co-owner of the Worcester Flower Shop at 808 Pleasant St. in Tronic Square. Ms. Portillo owns the business.

"We will do that by building a good foundation," said Mr. Ramirez. In fact, the shop is already grounded in a strong partnership. The pair have been married for seven years and have two children.

Choosing mid-summer to open, Mr. Ramirez and Ms. Portillo purposely wanted their endeavor to commence during what they consider the industry's slowest season in order to take time to learn who their customers are, the trends in the local community, and adjust to the flow of demand.

Mr. Ramirez recently graduated from Nichols College where he majored in business administration and Ms. Portillo has worked in the flower industry for the past 11 years arranging both silk and natural flowers. The couple hopes to pair their skills and expertise to become a reliable, local florist for the

Worcester community.

The road to entrepreneurship was long for Mr. Ramirez and Ms. Portillo and this reassurance was always appreciated.

"Between putting together the business plan, getting all the proper equipment" to run the business as well as attending classes at Cass Flower School in Watertown, Mass., said Mr. Ramirez, it took the pair a year to open their shop but they're happy with the outcome.

"The location is perfect for our plans" and desire to grow into the community said Mr. Ramirez. "We are in the west end of the city and close to most of the businesses" in that area, including Tatnuck Square, he added.

The business is next-door to Corner Grille and across the street from West Side Steak and BBQ.

"Flowers bring happiness to everyone," said Mr. Ramirez.

As business owners, and florists in particular, he said, "we like being part of these moments in [customers'] lives, we like to see them smile."

While neither grew up in Worcester, in fact Ms. Portillo emigrated from Guatemala six years ago, the couple says the combined two-plus decades they've spent in Central Massachusetts so far helped them shape their careers and build a passion for the local community.



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WORCESTER SPORTS STREET: BRAVEHEARTS, BEANPOT, BALLPARK, BOMBARDIERS, BOB COUSY, AND ... MAJOR TAYLOR

By Timothy P. Murray, *Chamber President and CEO*

The team behind Worcester Sports Street has enjoyed the newest offering for fans of the local sports landscape, Walter Bird's weekly radio show "The Worcester Sports Scene" on WCRN AM 830. The show covers a range of topics but, like Charter TV News's successful sports programming, Mr. Bird provides a heavy dose of local sports coverage including area high school teams. I enjoyed several recent interviews with South High Community School Football Coach Bob Larose. Larose has the Colonels playing winning football and the team has made it to the playoffs. A sign of positive things to come is the battle South High gave the high-ranking Doherty High School football team earlier in the season. A tip of the fedora to Coach Larose and staff as they seek to return South High to the days of gridiron glory. The Worcester Sports Scene can be heard every Friday from 9:00 to 10:00 am on WCRN.

THE PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF FREEDOM FOR THE HOUDINI OF THE HARDWOOD

Worcester resident and Boston Celtics legend Bob Cousy received the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House on August

22. Cousy, a star basketball player at College of the Holy Cross was honored in recognition of his work to combat racism as a player and coach, working with disadvantaged youth, and for starting the NBA's players union.

The Worcester City Council recently passed an order to erect a statue of Mr. Cousy outside the DCU Center that would share his story. Mr. Cousy's civil rights advocacy was the recent subject Gary M. Pomerantz's "The Last Pass: Cousy, Russell, the Celtics, and What Matters in the End" – a great holiday read or gift.

MAJOR TAYLOR MUSEUM COMING TO WORCESTER

As the construction of the former Worcester County Court House progresses, one of the exciting features of the 117-unit housing initiative is a 2,000-square-foot museum honoring the legacy of Marshall "Major" Taylor, also known as the Worcester Whirlwind. Mr. Taylor was a world champion professional cyclist who experienced racial prejudice as one of the first nationally- and internationally-acclaimed African American athletes during the 1890s and early 1900s. Taylor spent much of his life in Worcester and was recently chronicled by former Boston Globe

and Washington Post reporter Michael Kranish. The book is titled, "The World's Fastest Man: The Extraordinary Life of Cyclist Major Taylor." Another great holiday gift idea.

THE RUCKER EFFECT

As I have previously written, Worcester Railers owner Cliff Rucker has been a local economic development catalyst. His decision to bring an ECHL pro hockey team to Central Massachusetts, construction of the state-of-the-art \$23 million dollar Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center in the Canal District, as well as his various real estate acquisitions and substantial reinvestments into these properties have contributed greatly to the momentum underway in the region. However, Mr. Rucker's presence and investment in both the Railers and the Ice Center have significantly contributed to strengthening the hockey ecosystem in Central Massachusetts – most recently the launch of the Railers' junior teams.

Additionally, the Ice Center has allowed local colleges to upgrade their ice hockey programs. While not a tenant, Anna Maria College recently started a Div. III men's and women's hockey teams. As a result, a conversation is brewing about a semi-final championship between the teams at Anna Maria, Assumption College, Becker College, and Worcester State University. Could a Worcester version of the Beanpot at a Railers game or an outdoor venue such as Polar Park be in the cards? In a recent interview with Radio Worcester's Hank Stolz on Talk of the Commonwealth, WSU Athletic Director Mike Mudd acknowledged the school is exploring a women's ice hockey team. Stay tuned as the "Rucker Effect" reverberations continue.

The Worcester Railers won their home opener on Oct. 13 at the DCU Center starting the season hot before hitting a cold streak and losing four games as of the Sports Street deadline. The team has had trouble putting the puck in the net despite some strong goaltending. The season is young, but the Railers want to avoid the same slow start which caught up to the team last year and precluded them from the playoffs.

ROOT FOR THE HOME TEAM

The construction of Polar Park, the new home of the Worcester Red Sox, the Triple-A farm team of the Boston Red Sox, is well underway. Construction of the venue, Green Island Boulevard, Kelley Square and the development parcels of this \$250 million dollar public/private economic development project has been an exciting and transformative thing to witness. If any reader has time, it is well worth a weekend drive to see the work underway as the construction teams move forward to meet an opening day schedule of April of 2021.

Additionally, readers can log onto PolarPark.com to watch a video of the construction and learn about ticket opportunities.

A 4TH FUTURES COLLEGIATE BASEBALL LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP

Making a mad dash to the Futures Collegiate Baseball League playoffs, the Worcester Bravehearts mowed down the competition to capture their fourth championship. Congratulations to the Bravehearts players and organization on capturing the title. The FCBL recently announced the addition of a new team to the league. The New Britain Bees of New Britain, Connecticut have joined the summer league while the Bristol Blues have left the FCBL and are expected to join the New England Collegiate Baseball League. The Bravehearts recently released their 2020 summer schedule (28 home games) which includes a new playoff format.

BAY STATE BOMBARDIERS

The recent announcement that the Boston Celtic's development team would remain in Portland, Maine had some people sharing some stories about when Worcester hosted the Bay State Bombardiers of the Continental Basketball Association. The Bombardiers played at the Worcester Auditorium and were coached by Boston Celtics legend Dave Cowens. They had two mascots, Captain PJ and Lieutenant PJ, who during breaks in the game would run onto the court and dive headfirst across the floor with their arms out mimicking a plane. Worcester Telegram sportswriter Bill Ballou said that Cowens may have provided one of the all-time best quotes in Worcester sports history when he was asked, "Why do the Bombardiers have two mascots?" Cowens' responded, "In case one of them gets well."

FUTURE PLAYING FIELDS

As elected and appointed officials in city government and the Worcester Public Schools put the finishing touches on the construction for the new South High; including a new turf athletic field and track, a new turfed O'Connell Field on Grove Street, and contemplate a new Burncoat High School, which will also likely include a new turf athletic field; it's not unreasonable to think both South High and Burncoat High schools' athletic teams will want to play games more frequently at their home fields. This would help avoid busing transportation costs and logistics and would follow the model currently used by Worcester Technical High School which shares use of public athletic fields at Green Hill Park. Let's hope our leaders are looking to the future with imagination and are open to additional models as they contemplate athletic-field amenities of a new Doherty High School.



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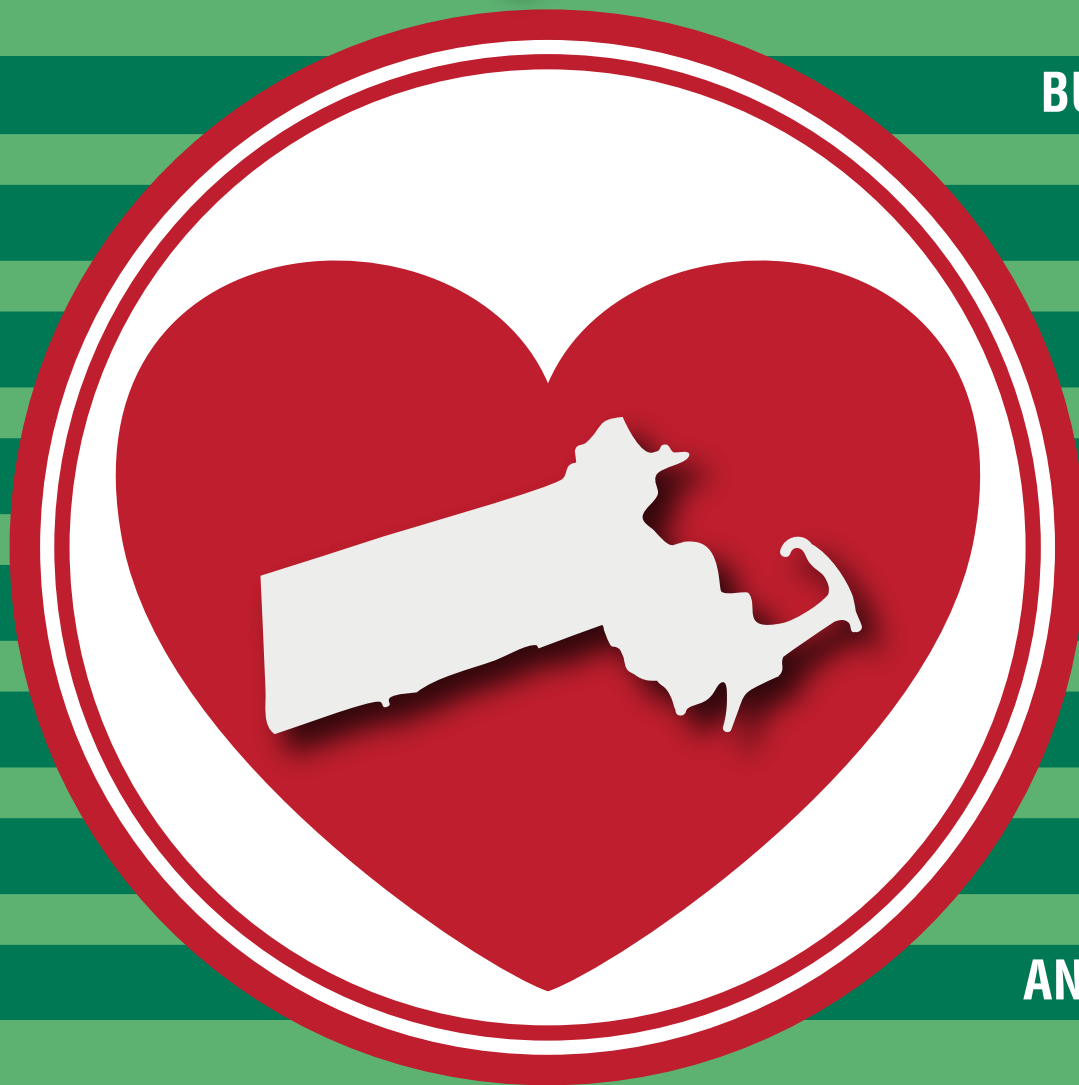
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