



DEFINING A NEW BRAND OF E.D. IN WORCESTER'S ERA OF "RENAISSANCE"

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AN URBAN SPHERE



Multiple addresses on or adjacent to Main Street in Worcester are part of the Menkiti Group's portfolio. **ABOVE LEFT:** 6 Chatham St. **ABOVE RIGHT:** 554 Main St. / PHOTOS COURTESY MENKITI GROUP

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

In Worcester, the term economic development has many contexts.

For some, the term encompasses striking while the iron is hot and leveraging interest in Worcester to build and advance a sustainable business community for the next generation of residents. For others, it's applicable when discussing the revitalization of venues like the Greendale Mall and the once-vacant former Worcester County court house.

One man is defining a new definition of the phenomenon.

Bo Menkiti – founder and CEO of the Menkiti Group out of Washington, D.C., where he also lives – inspired by his late father Ifeanyi Menkiti is strategically investing in buildings in certain pockets of Worcester. Mr. Menkiti's eye falls to urban landscapes in which economic development can help spur success among an existing community.

"Our investments, and approach to neighborhoods, are rooted in a defined strategy ... based in science and data overlaid with a little bit of [gut] feel," Mr. Menkiti said.

The "art" to his brand of economic development, he said, lies in the

National Association of Realtors' code of ethics: "under all is the land."

For him, those five words mean economic development "is fundamentally about people and the role the built environment plays in facilitating the human experience."

He feels his success in, and continued patronage of, the City of Worcester has been founded in supporting local creativity. In the evolution of a city, he said, "it's been the creative class who have driven" the momentum.

"Right now, that class in Worcester – representing a diversity of wealth, country of origin, industry expertise – is outside the mainstream and not fully embraced. Harnessing those [people, those skills] are crucial to development," he explained.

Mr. Menkiti is happy laying the groundwork, the quality of life elements that will enhance existing community, rather than prioritizing the needs of a perspective corporation shopping for their next relocation.

"That company will be drawn to the city by those aspects of its community," he said listing parks, shops, murals, and restaurants; "and employees want to live that experience."

That science cum social equity engagement has led to, as of early

2020, investment by the Menkiti Group in more than 250,000 sq. feet of real estate in and around Downtown. These figures – which represent primarily retail, creative office, and residential spaces – account for deals made by both Mr. Menkiti and his late father in a handful of properties.

The majority of the Menkiti Group's Worcester footprint is consolidated in the Main South neighborhood including multiple addresses on 400 and 500 blocks of Main Street and on Chatham Street.

A second phase of investment will see the purchase of an additional, roughly, 100,000 sq. feet in the city among five or six properties. When the current pipeline of properties are built out, the company will have invested more than \$35 million in the community.

WHAT DRAWS HIS EYE?

Investing in a property, residential or mixed-use, for Mr. Menkiti, isn't only about creating more housing or jobs. Breaking down his Worcester investments, Mr. Menkiti said the logic of investing in the Heart of the Commonwealth, universally, is founded in macroeconomics.

"There is a data-driven reason to

SEE MENKITI, PAGE 13

FITCHBURG MAYOR APPLAUDS CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL OF SINGLE TAX RATE

By Mike Krasner, Correspondent

Reacting to a vote by the Fitchburg City Council Dec. 3, the city's mayor, Stephen DiNatale, declared: "Now, we're competitive."

The vote, which was resoundingly successful at 8-2, immediately switched the city's then separate commercial and residential tax rates to a single rate – a feat the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce has advocated for in the Heart of the Commonwealth for decades.

As of Jan. 1, Fitchburg joins neighboring Leominster and Lunenburg in setting a single rate for all taxpayers, a practice now employed by 67.5 percent of 351 Massachusetts cities and towns, according to state figures.

The fiscal year 2020 single rate of \$19.71 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation established by the Fitchburg Council for residential as well as commercial/industrial/personal accounts, compared to the previous year's rates of \$20.49 for residential properties and \$22.09 for the remaining categories, represents a compromise for both categories of taxpayer.

"We are now in the bottom 20 percent of single-home tax [rates]," said Mr. DiNatale. "There will be 36 percent less impact on residential [taxpayers] this year [and] we will retain and grow our [tax] base. Fitchburg Councilor-at-Large Samantha Squailia explained rate shifts to narrow the tax gap

SEE TAXATION, PAGE 15

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With publication dates in February, May, August, and November, Chamber Exchange is a quarterly publication written and produced by Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce staff and members. Content is geared to members, business professionals, elected officials, and engaged citizens. Each quarter, 20,000 copies are mailed to 6,000 members and business professionals and roughly 13,000 City of Worcester registered voters. The remainder are distributed among area businesses.

If you're interested in being a point of distribution, or would like to advertise in 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.

CHAMBER CALENDAR OF EVENTS

save these dates
2020 **EVENTS**



MARCH

- 3 President's Council with Mike Kennealy, Mass. Secretary of Housing and Economic Development
- 5 Breakfast Club @College of the Holy Cross
- 11 Seminar Series: Succession Planning @Chamber
- 19 Business & Government Forum on Freight Rail @Chamber
- 19 Business After Hours @RECESS Take 2
- 24 HR Roundtable: Creating a Better Workplace @Chamber
- 26 Financial Services Roundtable @Chamber

APRIL

- 1 President's Council @Chamber
- 7 Health Care Roundtable: Shared Responsibility of the Consumer, Employer, Provider, and Payer @Chamber
- 15 Seminar Series: Sales @Chamber
- 21 POW Luncheon @Mechanics Hall
- 29 Woostapreneurs @College of the Holy Cross
- 30 Business After Hours @Pleasant Valley Country Club

MAY

- 7 Worcester Women's Leadership Conference @DCU Center
- 12 Diverse Professionals Roundtable CEO Breakfast @College of the Holy Cross
- 13 Seminar Series: Learn How to Navigate LinkedIn @Chamber
- 21 Business After Hours @The Beer Garden



DATES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please check the Chamber's website for the most up-to-date information or sign up for email notifications and events scheduled after this printing.



For affiliate events, please visit their respective websites:
• AuburnChamberMA.org
• BlackstoneValley.org
• CMSchamber.ning.com
• WachusettAreaChamber.org
• WDOchamberMA.com

WITH A NEW DECADE LOOMING, THERE'S VALUE IN REFLECTION

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

Recruit, retain, incubate. These three words are how we frame the work we do each and every day at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce on behalf of our approximately 2,100 members and the broader Central Massachusetts community.

Daily, we seek to recruit investors, developers, and new businesses to the region. Chamber staff members are continuously advocating for policies which promote best practices designed to retain local businesses as they expand and create new jobs to bolster the regional economy. In addition, we seek to incubate new businesses fueled by an idea, passion, hobby that can be commercialized and grown into a business.

Given this three-pronged approach, the Chamber manages a broad array of programs aimed at mentoring and supporting the entrepreneurial spirit. In this effort, we target the 33,000-plus college-age students who call Worcester home during the academic year; the immigrant population of Central Massachusetts; as well as those of any and all ages who, during the course of their career, want to pursue a new opportunity.

Recently; while attending a national conference of chamber of commerce leaders hosted in Huntsville, Ala.; I was reminded of how the pursuit of one idea, doggedly chased by a young boy from Worcester, led to the creation of dynamic economic clusters locally, across the United States, and throughout the world.

Robert H. Goddard, valedictorian of his class at Worcester's South High School and a graduate of both Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Clark University, had a dream as a young child of space exploration. His constant experimentation, which resulted in the invention of the liquid-fueled rocket, ushered in the space age and earned him recognition as one of the pioneers of modern rocketry and man's landing on the moon – the 50th anniversary of which was widely celebrated in July.

His research and patents were utilized by U.S., German, and Russian scientists in the race for space superiority during World War II and the height of the decades-long Cold War.

As a result of his creativity and designs, as WWII was closing out U.S. military and political leaders began secretly planning Operation Paperclip with the intention of repatriating as many German scientists and technicians then working on the German V-2 rocket



ABOVE: Timothy P. Murray. / PHOTO CHAMBER ARCHIVE

to the U.S. as possible. The leader of the German cohort of scientists was Wernher von Braun. Mr. von Braun, who would later serve in multiple leadership roles at NASA, said Mr. Goddard's work "blazed the trail" for modern rocketry.

Mr. von Braun spent much of his U.S.-based career at the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, where NASA's George C. Marshall Space Flight Center is located.

Since 1950, the Redstone Arsenal has been a major research and testing facility for military- and civilian-use rockets.

Major companies such as Raytheon, Aerojet Rocketdyne, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman have invested in large-scale facilities around Huntsville buttressing the community's growing innovation economy.

While visiting another landmark there; the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, an outstanding museum that tells the story of U.S. efforts to reach the moon, and beyond; I spied something inspiring.

Among the items decorating a recreation of Mr. von Braun's office, was a chair where, it's said, he would put his briefcase each day when he arrived. Emblazoned on the chairback was Clark University's logo. This small but noteworthy token of appreciation, both to Mr. Goddard's contributions to modern rocketry research and his connection to Worcester, spoke loudly to me.

If you have a dream or passion you're interested in exploring and want to learn about establishing a business, please contact Jacob Vazquez, our economic development associate, by email at jvazquez@worcesterchamber.org to learn how we, and some of our partner organizations, can assist you with planning and resources. The incubation of new businesses and ideas is at the heart of our mission.

CORRECTION: Breanna DiBella, née Goodrow, and the firm she co-owns with her husband, Studio DiBella, were misidentified in the November 2019 edition of Chamber Exchange.

YOUR CBD STORE SUCCEEDS IN WORCESTER'S WEBSTER SQUARE

By Alexander Valle, Your CBD Store Franchise Owner

My involvement with the Your CBD Store brand started in May 2019 when a friend approached me with an opportunity.

This opportunity came in the form of an offer to open my own business while helping people in the Worcester community find comfort in their everyday lives.

In researching the driving mission behind Your CBD Store, I identified that the brand carried some of the highest-quality cannabidiol, or CBD, available on the market. At the time, and to this day, the company is gaining ground and storefronts are popping up across the region.

For me, what sealed the deal was that owners of Your CBD Store franchises are not in competition with one another. Instead, each owner similarly wants their fellow franchisee to succeed.

It was clear that owning a franchise was the best option.

Last year, with the help of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, I launched the business on Sept. 16 and the following week held a ceremonial ribbon cutting on Sept. 25. The shop is conveniently located on Stafford Street in Worcester's Webster Square neighborhood.

Within weeks of the grand opening, former New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski held a press conference and discussed his love of CBD and its positive effects on his health. In this moment, Mr. Gronkowski, a celebrity-athlete in Massachusetts – if not the entire country, became the first athlete to help endorse CBD as a socially-acceptable treatment.

Now, with increased interest, the conversation around CBD became one of education. With a celebrity-athlete endorsement, many people were turning to the treatment but not aware of how or why it would treat their ailments.

To describe CBD in one word I use "balance." Human bodies contain an endocannabinoid system which courses through the central and peripheral nervous systems. However, the internal system does not produce enough cannabinoids to meet the body's needs.

To bridge that gap, consumers often turn to CBD, an element naturally occurring in industrial hemp. It is available from Your CBD Store in tinctures, lotions, capsules, bath bombs, face serums, lip balms, even pet products.

Unlike other businesses, think gas stations and chain pharmacies, that sell CBD products alongside snacks and beverages, Your CBD Store staff are knowledgeable, avid users of CBD steeped in its application treatment of various ailments.

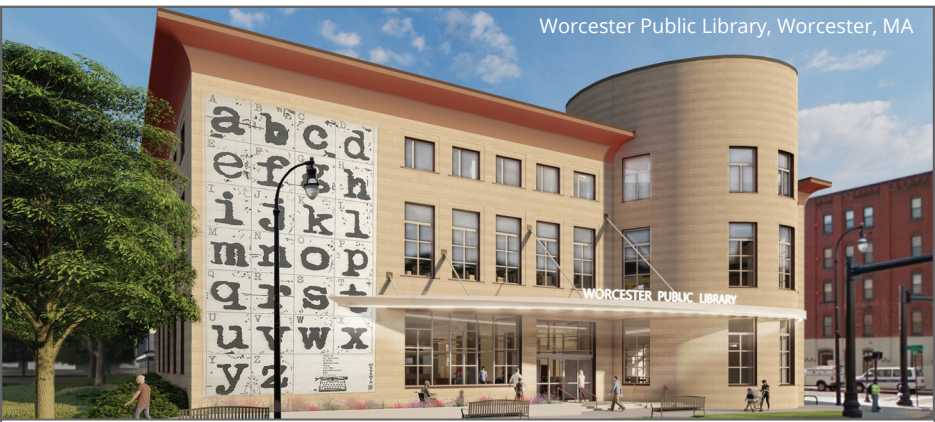
Not all CBD is created equal – especially those being sold without approval from the U.S. Federal Drug Administration. A winner of multiple 2019 USA CBD Expo awards, products sold by Your CBD Store are based on hemp derived from FDA-approved farms and is third-party tested.

Open seven days each week, the Webster Square Your CBD Store is looking to expand its footprint via off-site sales at fellow greater Worcester community businesses.

Through popups at local gyms, nail salons, and CBD parties, the staff are educating the public about the use of CBD products and its origins.



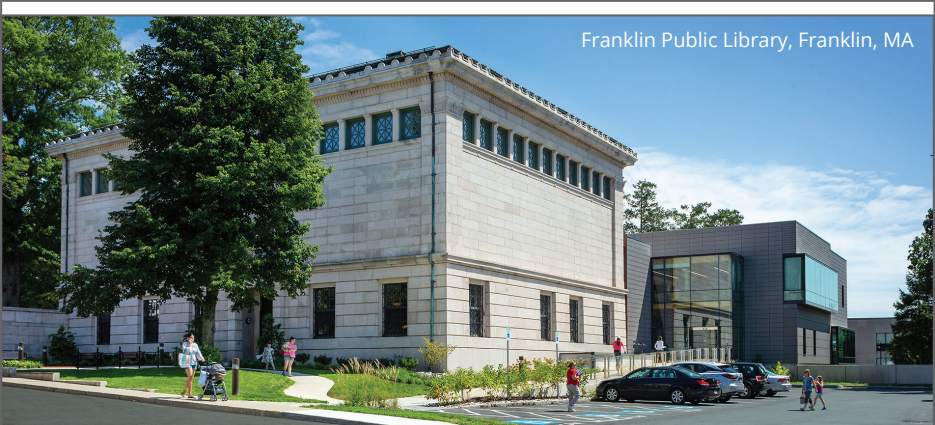
LEFT BOTTOM: The interior of Your CBD Store, at 91 Stafford St. in Worcester's Webster Square, is designed to be a warm, welcoming environment where customers come to learn about various CBD products and their application. / PHOTO BY ALEXANDER VALLE



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DIANNE BENSON DAVIS, Conservationist/Author
DR. DAVID GREENE, Educational Leader
MATT MATTUS, Horticulturalist/Author
REV. DR. LESTER MCCORN, Educational & Spiritual Leader
JOHN MORELLO, Decorated War Hero (Posthumous)
DONNA OLSEN RED WING, Social Pioneer (Posthumous)
JONATHAN STARR, Investment Professional/Philanthropist
FALLON HEALTH, Friend of Education

Do you know a colleague or classmate who has achieved great things? To nominate that individual for the Class of 2020, visit www.wedfwps.org or contact advancement@wedfwps.org



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WEDF FUNDS MINI-GRANTS FOR WORCESTER SCHOOLS

The Worcester Educational Development Foundation, Inc. (WEDF) announced funding for 17 mini grants totaling more than \$6,000 for Worcester Public Schools. The grants will be used for curriculum enhancement programs focusing on STEM/STEAM.

Recipients are:

Megan Shea	Belmont Community	Hoop Designs
AnnMarie Morrissey	Worcester East Middle	Indoor Plants
Teresa Rivera	Thorndyke Road	TRS Composts
Meredith Lord	Burncoat Middle	Painting Project
Victoria Caezza	Burncoat Middle	What's the Matter with Color?
Luke Robert	May Street	Full STEM Ahead
Sarah Connell	Burncoat Middle & High	Let's Build a Ballpark
Noeliz Irizarry	Midland Street	Creating a Classroom Museum
Kathy Martinelli	Columbus Park	Animals Are Everywhere
Gretchen Savaria	Grafton Street	Physical Education Fiasco
Kyle Brenner	Worcester Technical High	Growing Technical Skills
Brenda Dubrey	Thorndyke Road	Kids in the Kitchen
Zohar Badenhansen	Chandler Magnet	Weather Station
Ellen Moynihan	West Tatnuck	STEAM in the Art Room
Michelle Gabrielian	Lincoln Street	Recharge and In Charge
Stacey Hill	Doherty High	Calculate Carbon Storage
Emilie Richmond	South High Community	Travel to the Olympiad

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2019 IN REVIEW: LEGISLATION, POLAR PARK, TAXES

By Alex Guardiola, Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy

At any given point in time, the Massachusetts legislature has hundreds of pending bills making it a challenge for the average business owner to track those which may affect their operations. At the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, we are keenly aware of this and work hard to ensure we are paying attention to those bills and working with partners to support legislation conducive to the business community and fair to everyone involved.

NEW LEGISLATION

Last year, several laws were passed that had a significant impact on Chamber member businesses. These included the "grand bargain;" an act increasing the minimum wage and for which the Chamber offered numerous roundtables and three seminars on the topic to assist businesses with implementation, large crowds attended each of these sessions; and the "distracted driving" bill that makes it illegal to drive while operating any hand-held device.

PENDING LEGISLATION

EDUCATION: In collaboration with the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, the Chamber advocated for Bill S.2412 designed to provide additional funding to schools in districts that serve low-income students and to improve funding opportunities for all districts.

The bill increases investments in other educational activities including transportation, school facilities, guidance and psychological services, charter tuition reimbursements, and special education. Lastly, it establishes a trust to fund creative educational approaches and close future opportunity gaps.

TRANSPORTATION: Last August, a report on traffic congestion in the Commonwealth found significant congestion on routes 290 and 9 between Worcester and Westborough during peak travel hours. To build consensus among business organizations, and help guide leaders, the Massachusetts Business Coalition for Transportation was established. Co-chairs Timothy P. Murray, and counterparts from the Greater Boston and Cape Cod chambers of commerce, as well as the Western Mass Economic Development Corp., submitted recommendations to MA House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo and MA Senate President Karen E. Spilka. As a result, an \$18 billion transportation bill authorizing funding for a range of projects over the next, roughly, five years was put forth by Gov. Charlie Baker. Said funding would be used to expand the MBTA, reform contract and procurement practices, support congestion-reducing projects, and

expand public transit infrastructure. Both the House and Senate will begin debate on this bill within the coming months.

CITY OF WORCESTER

The construction of Polar Park, the future home of the Worcester Red Sox, along with the reconfiguration of Kelley Square, has sparked a flurry of interest and activity from new developers across the country. The Chamber was a key factor in bringing the team to the city and, along with fellow members of the city's Economic Development Coordinating Council, continues to field requests and work with partners to foster interest.

In working toward an 18-hour downtown, and sparked largely by CitySquare and the redevelopment of Mercantile Center, Worcester's Main Street is on the rise. The Theatre District is also transforming as the Menkiti Group redevelops several buildings with new residential space and ground floor retail. More on that subject can be found on pages one and 13.

The Chamber is proud of our work with the city and others to bring new companies and developers to Worcester and the region. Our collective work has brought an enhanced level of investment and economic activity to Worcester with a number of projects currently underway in various parts of the city.

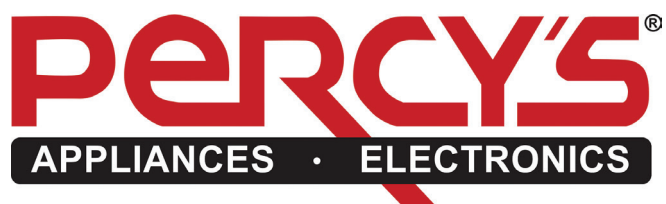
A NOTABLE EXCEPTION: TAX CLASSIFICATION

Now among the top 20 cities with the highest commercial tax rate cities in the Commonwealth, Worcester's dual tax rate has a negative impact on businesses. Worcester is the sixth highest, and only municipality, in the county with a dual tax rate system.

For the last four years, city councilors have shifted more and more of the residential tax burden to commercial and industrial taxpayers putting Worcester at a competitive disadvantage to surrounding communities. In fact, many are moving in the opposite direction. Last year, Auburn narrowed the gap for the second year in a row, in 2018 Webster unanimously voted to eliminate the dual tax rate, and in December, Fitchburg followed suit effective New Year's Day 2020.

While some large businesses can, and are willing to, absorb exorbitant taxes, most small businesses have very small profit margins and the commercial tax rate can make or break them. Those who do not own their building often have a "triple net lease" where, in addition to their rent payments, they also foot the bill for utilities, insurance, and property taxes.

The Chamber will continue to advocate for a fair and equitable tax rate for businesses and residents alike. If you have concerns about a policy impacting your industry, please reach out at aguardiola@worcesterchamber.org.



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ABOVE: In September, the University of Massachusetts Medical School announced the construction of a Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic. Above are renderings of the proposed exterior of the building. / PHOTOS COURTESY UMASS MEDICAL SCHOOL

UNDER COLLINS' LEADERSHIP, UMASS MEDICAL SCHOOL FLEXES STRENGTHS, SKILLS, COMMITMENT TO CENTRAL MASS RESIDENTS

By Emily Gowdey-Backus, Director of Communications

Much of the philosophy behind recent announcements by the University of Massachusetts Medical School can be summed up by an image that hangs above the chancellor's desk.

Painted in 1863, Sir Luke Fildes' "The Doctor" is a somber scene in which a doctor sits at the side of a child suffering from tuberculosis, its parents in the background distraught.

But what the chancellor sees speaks enormously for how he has led the medical school and what is to come in the next few years.

"There's no CAT scan, MRI machine, no lab tests or antibiotics," said Chancellor Michael F. Collins, M.D. "What is there is a caring relationship between doctor and patient."

He hangs this picture over each of his desks to remind him of what's at stake and reiterate the importance of the work of his faculty, his students, and his researchers.

Below, are excerpts from an interview with Chancellor Collins the Chamber conducted in mid-January chronicling his time at the medical school; the institution, city, and regional role in bio-medical research universally; and the decision to augment campus services with the addition of a Veterans Affairs community-based outpatient clinic.

In 2005, you were appointed chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Boston campus. What was your focus in the Commonwealth's Hub and what drew you to Worcester three years later? While chancellor of the Boston campus, I was asked to come here as interim, my predecessor had stepped down and they needed someone. The focus of the Commonwealth at that time was life sciences, the new initiative then-Gov. Mitt Romney was putting in place, and there was going to be a \$1 billion investment made in the life sciences. In a way, the university was asking me to be the point person on that and to represent the university and medical school interests with respect to that.

There's only a little bit of competition between Worcester

and Boston. What was it like, staying in the UMass system, but going from Boston to Worcester? I never felt any competition. Our government, its leaders, and the civic-minded folk in Worcester are all about getting things done. That's no knock on anywhere else, but I find it's a very can-do place. For me to come here and say can we create a richer science environment, can we expand, can we think about the potential for Worcester as a greater life sciences hub, has been some of the excitement of being here.

You mentioned a can-do attitude and that only happens with collaboration and shared resources. I'm curious how you decide where to put yourself as a resource in terms of board appointments or seats and what you spend your time doing in terms of engaging with the community. How do you decide where you'll target your time and what your passions are in terms of engagement outside the university? I find it hard to make lots of outside meetings just because my job here requires quite a bit of travel so I've been fairly selective. I am quite community focused and we have been working closely with entities within the community that don't necessarily take my time but rather my support and encouragement. That's also a role we can play.

You've shown that your, and the university's, engagement with the community, for example knowing the VA Hospital was a necessary unavailable resource, is strong. A person who serves the nation in the military should be looked after and institutions, like ours, that provide care, should be part of that [network].

There was a report six to eight years ago about access for veterans to services in their community and Central Massachusetts didn't fare very well. At the time, I said to our folks, I want to be on a list where we're doing great things so we began a dialogue with the VA. Shortly after, the VA opened three clinics here at the medical school – podiatry, optometry, and audiology – and some specialty and mental

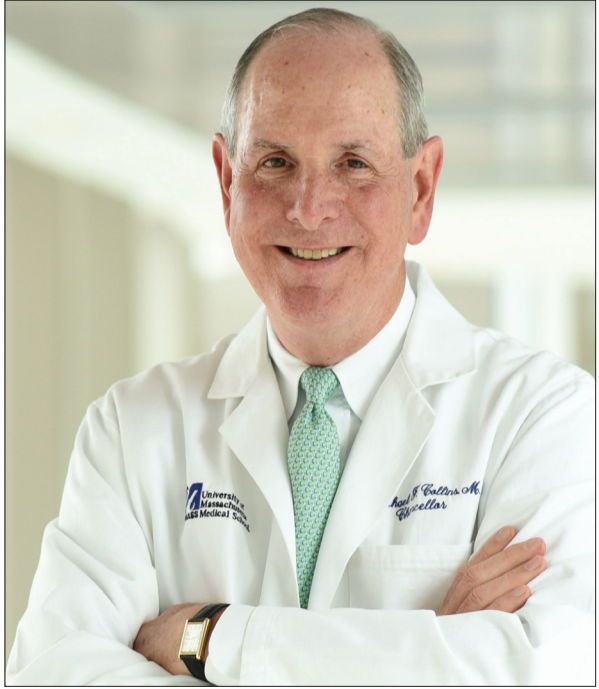
health services in the ambulatory care center. ... [What came about was a] VA community-based outpatient clinic which should allow folks to have a closer relationship to the community and to our care givers.

Frankly, if you look after veterans when you're learning you're much more inclined to look after veterans when you're in practice ... you feel comfortable with it, you've learned how to do that, you see the importance of it, and, particularly with the veterans, you get a tremendous amount of encouragement and support. ... Some of the best medical experiences I had during my training were at VA facilities and I want our students to have that opportunity.

How will the new VA facility expand on what services already exist in Worcester? The one to be built on the UMass campus will mark a significant improvement in space, access to specialty care, and proximity to an academic health sciences campus.

Why was UMass, specifically, the best teaching school in the area to outfit this new facility? I'm probably the least militaristic person on the face of the earth, but as a doctor, when you look at someone who is willing, able, and has served the nation, I feel a responsibility to look after their health care needs – always have. If you're willing to make that sacrifice for the country, then the country should do something for you. Because we have a system that provides care to veterans, what better way to do it than to provide it in an academic location close to home?

There's a historic relationship in academic medicine with the VA. In fact, if you were to look at medical schools around the country you would see many have [long-term] relationships with the VA. When I was at the Jamaica Plain VA as a medical student ... you were darn



ABOVE: Chancellor Michael F. Collins, M.D. / PHOTO COURTESY UMASS MEDICAL SCHOOL

proud to wear your coat. [Today, a partnership between UMass Medical School and the VA] would foster education for our learners, research for those who investigate, and care for the special patient population. And ... this is going to be right on Rt. 9 with a big American flag and our two logos right there – the messaging is going to be awesome. The public medical school and the Commonwealth are here to take care of the veterans.

Will it play a role in local economic development? Well, there will be new jobs and ... I don't know how many patients will come every day but we have 270 parking spots and if we turn that over five times a day that's [more than] 1,000.

What feedback have you heard from the UMass community? It couldn't be more positive. People are thrilled. If you were to take a poll asking if people want to take care of the veterans, the people in the med school would all say yes we really want to be part of that. We also have a number of students with military backgrounds who are very, very excited. I have a fourth-year student who is working with me now on a capstone project on this exact thing. There's not a downside to this, anywhere, other than it's going to take us 20 months to get it here.

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2018 NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
RESEARCH FUNDING, NO. 34 IN THE NATION



\$1.6B

AMOUNT OF ECONOMIC IMPACT IN THE
GREATER WORCESTER COMMUNITY

FIRST COHORT OF CANNABIS POLICY STUDENTS ENROLL AT CLARK AS BUDDING INDUSTRY BEGINS TO DEVELOP STATEWIDE

By Allison Chisolm,
Correspondent

The business of pot is hot. When Clark University and the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce co-sponsored a panel discussion on the emerging cannabis industry in Massachusetts last November, interest was so great they relocated to a larger venue to accommodate the nearly 200 attendees.

In the end, discussion of the historic legalization of cannabis in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts took place in a historic setting – Mechanics Hall.

Since voters in the 2016 state election passed a ballot petition to legalize adult use of marijuana, both state and local governments have grappled with the implications for health care, public safety, social service agencies, and employers.

In that time, the state’s Cannabis Control Commission established regulations detailing the licensing, production, and sale of marijuana, but each town has developed its own host agreement for those businesses.

“Municipal officials were seeking policy guidelines,” said John LaBrie, dean of the School of Professional Studies and associate provost for graduate education at Clark University. In late 2018, many local leaders felt unprepared for this

new retail market in what remains a controlled substance that, with overuse, presents health and safety challenges similar to those of alcohol and prescription drugs.

The dean’s faculty colleagues engaged in conversations on ways to extend the school’s public policy programs to meet the needs of these towns – traditional employers of its graduate students.

“People are struggling with” cannabis legalization as a public policy issue, said Mr. LaBrie.

With a longstanding master of public administration graduate program, Clark sees its role as an education institution to equip people to tackle such issues and, in June 2019, the school announced the creation of a new graduate certificate in regulatory affairs for cannabis control – the first in the nation and completely online.

“We didn’t set out to be innovators,” said Mr. LaBrie, but the school did meet demand from an underserved market. Ten other states have legalized marijuana in recent years and more than 20 now permit its sale for medicinal purposes. Therein, policies and regulations vary widely. Currently, the only regulatory-focused program in the country, Clark’s online course structure enables enrollment on a national scale.

The program’s first semester began in September with fewer than 20 students yet another dozen joined the program in January. Classes include students from several New England and western states plus Hawaii. Mr. LaBrie expects to see the first graduates from the program matriculate in May.

Initial course evaluations from the fall reveal “students are really happy,” he reports.

Another joyous development for those who work as municipal or state employees is Clark’s November announcement of a tuition waiver – essentially making the graduate certificate free to those intent on understanding the cannabis-related policy issues they encounter in their work.

“We wanted to make our program as accessible as possible to that population,” said the dean. Although students are still responsible for certain fees, the waiver program began with the January semester.

The program encompasses three seven-week online courses, examining how educational and enforcement policies are implemented, today’s legal and regulatory framework, and best practices to minimize potentially negative effects of cannabis on



ABOVE: John LaBrie, Clark University dean of the School of Professional Studies and associate provost for graduate education. **BELOW:** The 2019 panel at Mechanics Hall. / PHOTOS COURTESY CLARK UNIVERSITY



public health and safety. The courses are taught, and were developed by, a team of practitioners with local expertise, including academicians, police, and legislators.

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BLACKSTONE VALLEY AWARDED WORKFORCE GRANT FUNDING

By Jeannie Hebert, BV Chamber President & CEO

While the Commonwealth's workforce is among the best-educated, a high concentration are aging and our younger workforce is neither large enough nor well-enough educated to replace those who will soon retire.

Add to that the substantial wait list for vocational schools and it's evident significant gaps exist between workforce preparedness of that generation and the demands of the labor market and employers.

This conundrum was the impetus for the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce's BV Ed Hub. A training center in Whitinsville, the BV Ed Hub is equipped with design, fabrication, and computing equipment and supports 13 public high schools as well as the Grafton Jobs Corp. Classes introduce students to lucrative career paths in advanced manufacturing.

Recently, the Blackstone Valley Chamber and the BV Ed Hub

received substantial grants in support of its mission to solve this issue. Monetary awards include a \$565,000 Skills Capital grant (2018-2019); a \$95,000 U.S. Chamber of Commerce award supporting remote learning technology (2019-2020); an \$80,000 Mass Growth Capital Corporation grant offering technical assistance, training sessions, and counseling to small businesses (2020); a \$169,000 Regional Economic Development Organizational grant from the MA Office of Business Development shared with the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce to promote economic development (2020); and a 2020 \$112,000 grant from the Commonwealth Corporation to partner with the Worcester County Sheriff's Department on an inmate re-entry training program.

A core tenant of the Blackstone Valley Chamber's work is to secure jobs, with living wages, to help local residents afford the high cost of living in Massachusetts.

AUBURN TOWN MANAGER RECOGNIZED FOR COMMITTEE TO EMPOWER LOCAL WOMEN

By Emily Gowdey-Backus, Director of Communications

Julie Jacobson considers herself lucky to have discovered her passion – history and political science – in high school and has doggedly pursued such a career in Central Massachusetts since.

From campaign volunteer to assistant city manager for the City of Worcester, she has worked to promote economic development for various distinct municipalities as well as the region. Her mantra has been: "What's good for the city of Worcester is good for the region and what's good for the region is good for the city of Worcester."

She truly believes a broader perspective is what will, eventually, lead to shared success for all parties involved.

"What we recognized then, in the 1990s, was that you can't only focus economic development within the boundaries of your municipality," she added.

And, it's not only in economic advancement that Ms. Jacobson has focused her resources but also in the encouragement and promotion of women to positions in municipal management and local government.

Ms. Jacobson, who has held top-tier municipal management positions in her career, has found the ranks lonely.

"There were very few women" in similar roles, she explained. "I can't speak to a percentage at that time, but I can definitely say it was a minority who held city manager or assistant city manager [positions]."

According to Massachusetts Municipal Management Association data, less than one quarter (21 percent) of town manager or town administrator positions in Massachusetts are held by women. Nationally, the figure falls to 19.9 percent.

While that is an increase, said Ms. Jacobson, it is still "low." In her career, she would like to see the ratio of men to women in municipal management and administration be "reflective of the demographics" of the community they serve. At less than 25 percent women, she said, local government is not representative of communities in Massachusetts.

Most recently, her three-plus decades of leadership and advancement of women in local

government and municipal positions were recognized Jan. 13 by the MMMA. The organization – which supports members of Massachusetts governments through professional development, discussions, and trainings – put her name forward for the 2019 League of Women in Government Leadership Trailblazer award. From 27 nominations, Ms. Jacobson was chosen as one of 10 finalists from across the United States.

On Jan. 13, Ms. Jacobson was also acknowledged as the incoming president of the MMMA. She also serves on the board of the Massachusetts Municipal Association, the MMMA's parent organization.

The docket was a busy one for Ms. Jacobson on Jan. 13. That evening, the Board of Selectmen for the Town of Auburn voted to reappoint Ms. Jacobson for another three-year term. Two years prior, with one year left in her contract, the Board of Selectmen voted in January 2018 to amend her contract extending it for another three-year term. That amendment ensured Ms. Jacobson's role as town manager until January 2023, however, the town charter only allows for appointments of three years.

In order to make everything "in-sync" with the town's charter, she said, a vote took place Jan. 13 to

re-appoint her as town manager.

Ms. Jacobson believes one of the reasons why the MMMA submitted her name for the national award is because of her founding role in the MMMA's

Ms. Jacobson described women in top-level local government positions as the "minority."

Women Leading Government committee. Now in its third year, the committee has been recognized by the MMMA and is supported by a budget from the organization. For the past two years, Ms. Jacobson has chaired the group.

Three events are held annually with the aim of educating women in local government, or those interested in the industry as a career path, about the resources available to them, mentorships, training, and networking opportunities.

While there are more, today most senior-level management positions are still held by men," said Ms. Jacobson. "Our mission is to provide a supportive environment for women in local government and those thinking about entering ... to encourage advancement and management of women."



Photo of Trapp Falls by Jerry Callaghan

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CITY INVESTS IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION EFFORTS RELOCATING, UPDATING STEARNS TAVERN IN VOLUNTEER-LED INVESTMENT

By Rebecca Landry, Marketing Intern

Relocated from Main Street to Park Avenue and now to Mill Street, Stearns Tavern has a new life in a new home. Constructed in 1812 and having served as everything from a bank to a carpet store, the City of Worcester and a band of dedicated volunteers, many of whom are Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce members, moved the tavern to its latest location at Coes Park on Mill Street in 2016.

This move commenced three years of renovation until it opened to the public in October 2019.

Constructed circa 1812 by Charles Stearns, the building is among Worcester’s oldest. Today, it is one

of only two structures in the city that are more than 200 years old.

The project took a large amount of teamwork, but a “true partnership” was developed between Preservation Worcester, Seven Hills Foundation, and the city, said Phil Niddrie, City of Worcester special project coordinator.

“Anytime we can save a building, that’s our goal. [It’s a] benefit to the whole city,” said Megan Blomgren Burgess, Preservation Worcester’s director of education and community engagement.

Of the 132 companies which donated their time and resources to the renovation, more than half are members of the Chamber.

Thanking those members, and

all participants, Ms. Blomgren Burgess called the project a “labor of love.” She added, in her time at Preservation Worcester she’s “unaware of another project that [spurred] so much teamwork.”

Hoping to encourage public patronage of the facility, Stearns Tavern is now home to a café and workforce training center run by Seven Hills Foundation as well as an accessible playground. The café is open to the public and features a large gathering spot for meetings or family get togethers. The foundation manages the site at no cost to the city.

On display outside the café is a salvaged piece of metal (see below) representative of the history of

the site on which the tavern now stands. Coes Park was once the headquarters of Coes Wrench Company, inventor of the monkey wrench.

The tavern also features a room decorated in federal-era furnishings, the age of the original structure. Antiques placed throughout the facility were purchased locally in Brimfield and Haverhill. While the public can gather inside the building, this room remains roped off similar to a museum exhibit.

Although the first floor has been fully renovated, the second floor, which features a dance hall and residential-style rooms, was left untouched and remains unopen to the public as of winter 2020.



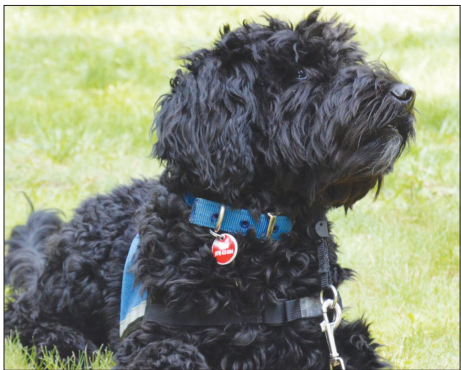
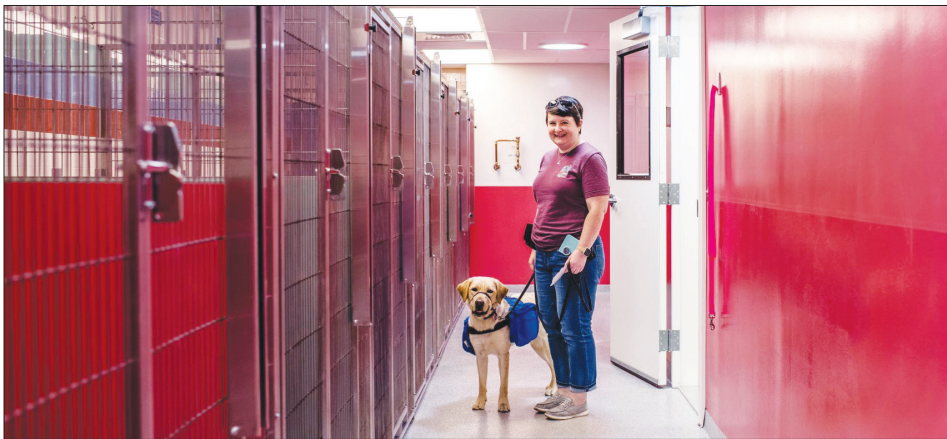
ABOVE LEFT: An interior room of the Stearns Tavern has been renovated to feature the 1920s-era mural depicting a battle of the American Revolution. The room can be utilized for conferences or other larger gatherings. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Saved during the renovation, this piece of metal reads “Coes Handle Wrench, Stronger than Any” a reminder of the site’s original use as part of the Coes Wrench Company. / PHOTOS BY EMILY GOWDEY-BACKUS



ABOVE LEFT: Past the café run by Seven Hills Foundation is a gathering spot complete with comfortable chairs and fireplace. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A selection of the volunteers, and Chamber members, who helped return Stearns Tavern to its glory. From left: Phil Niddrie, City of Worcester; Ed and Charran Fisher, Fisher Contracting Corp.; Raymond Simoncini, Raymond James Restoration Inc.; Megan Blomgren Burgess, Preservation Worcester; Mark Allen and Cathy Lewis, Botany Bay Construction Co. Inc.; Robert Para, Lamoureux Pagano & Associates Architects. / PHOTOS BY EMILY GOWDEY-BACKUS



ABOVE (ALL THREE): The second floor of Stearns Tavern remains untouched from when the structure was moved to Coes Park. On the left is a 20th century bathroom most likely from the time the building was used as a residence, the middle is a detail of what is believed to be a dance hall, and on the right are hand-hewn boards, a detail from the dance hall ceiling. / PHOTOS BY EMILY GOWDEY-BACKUS



TOP: An interior view of the new kennels shows NEADS' state-of-the-art Canine Center in Princeton, Mass. **MIDDLE:** Two NEADS service dogs. **BOTTOM:** NEADS CEO Gerry DeRoche speaks at the Canine Center grand opening in June 2019. / PHOTOS COURTESY NEADS

NEADS OPENS STATE-OF-THE-ART CANINE CENTER RENEWING MISSION, COMMITMENT

By Rebecca Landry, Marketing Intern

Suited for larger dogs and an upgrade to the decades-old technology of the previous facility, on June 1 NEADS opened its new Canine Center.

Known across the nation, the 44-year-old Princeton-based organization trains Labrador retrievers as service dogs and claims to be one of the first such companies in the United States.

Designed for dogs to be let loose within a central hub, the Canine Center consists of 31 larger kennels and represents an evolution in dog training technology.

NEADS' previous kennel was "too confining for the labs and created a fair amount of stress" said CEO Gerry DeRoche. The prior kennels were designed for beagle-sized dogs with shorter doors and smaller individual space. Today, he added, most NEADS dogs are much larger.

"We needed to be more efficient, [we needed] a facility that would be warm, welcoming, and less stressful for our dogs," said Mr. DeRoche.

NEADS spent 18 months studying similar organizations' canine training facilities across the country, but could not find one that was suitable for their model.

Instead, an architect from New Mexico whose expertise lies in structures designed specifically for

human and animal use was hired by NEADS to design the new facility.

The eight-month renovation cost \$1.5 million and was paid for through capital campaign fundraising.

"Having one major donor gave us the confidence" said Mr. DeRoche that this was a necessary upgrade and that the public would want to be involved in its creation.

NEADS plans to continue expanding its Central Massachusetts footprint with a 6,000-sq.-ft. off-campus breeding center which will similarly be paid for through the fundraising of a second capital campaign. NEADS previously did not have a breeding program and struggled with access to qualified puppies. The development of a breeding program, said Mr. Deroche, will fix this problem.

At any given time, NEADS has 70 to 80 dogs in training and provides nearly 50 clients with service animals per year. However, these numbers can increase with the presence of a breeding center and increased access to more-qualified dogs.

"If we're going to be successful, we need to have the facilities to support" our mission, he added. "NEADS world-class service dogs change lives. With everything that we do, it's geared to make sure we have a world-class experience for our clients."

NOMS EATERY: A POP-UP SUCCESS IN LOCAL FOOD SCENE

By Emily Gowdey-Backus, Director of Communications

From dishwashing to pop-up culinary entrepreneur, the story of Noms Eatery is one of learning the ropes.

Like many in the industry, co-owner and head chef, Bryan Baltazar began his culinary career behind the scenes before moving up to food prep and eventually a culinary arts degree from the Chicago branch of the Illinois Institute of Art. All the while, his passion for food and curiosity in flavors broadening.

"I haven't looked back since," he said. For the other half of Noms' duo; Jennifer Palazzo, co-owner, general manager, and chef assistant; the passion was contagious.

"Bryan taught me cooking truly is an art with unlimited creativity," said Ms. Palazzo who is also engaged to Mr. Baltazar.

Long wanting to establish her own business, Ms. Palazzo saw her opportunity in tandem with her partner. "It made complete sense to combine Bryan's passion for nutritious, locally-sourced food and my passion for selling a product in which we feel immense pride," she said.

Wanting to hone in on the farm-to-table experience for both himself, as chef, as well as the health benefits it provides his customers, Mr. Baltazar said a central mission is "to serve delicious, creative food his customers know is fresh and sustainable."

In addition, he said: "We try to capitalize on the abundance of the fresh ingredients New England has to offer and also incorporate local greens and cheese in our creations."

In addition to serving nutritious, locally-sourced food, Noms also offers gluten-free and vegetarian meals. Individuals with those restrictions, said Mr. Baltazar, "often struggle to experience amazing meals because their options are limited."



ABOVE: Bryan Baltazar and Jennifer Palazzo of Noms Eatery. / PHOTO BY EMILY GOWDEY-BACKUS

The pair moved east when Mr. Baltazar was offered a job as a private executive chef cooking for fraternities and sororities at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, something was missing. "I felt a burning desire to share my talents with more people and wanted to inspire people to develop their relationship with food," added Mr. Baltazar.

Soon after, Ms. Palazzo enrolled in a 10-week business planning course at the Westborough-based Center for Women and Enterprise. Therein, she was introduced to the Worcester Regional Food Hub and the resources available through membership.

Noms launched in April 2019, with a pop-up event at Redemption Rock Brewing Co. in Worcester.

The brand's cuisine is familiar and creative, said the co-owners. When asked to describe their flavor profiles, the pair used the words "seasonal, cultural, unique, and fresh" to describe their menu.

Thanks to their start from the Food Hub, the Noms duo hopes to build a strong following in Central Mass and open a restaurant and market within the next five years. By that time, they hope to establish an online ordering system, larger event catering capabilities, take-out options, homemade products to go, and decrease their carbon footprint.

Inspired by collaborations with Southport Café and Grocery in Chicago and Restaurant North in Armonk, N.Y., Mr. Baltazar said he is driven by "out-of-the-box" creativity.

There's another demographic with which Noms food resonates as well.

"Because we are deaf, [the local] deaf community has become some of our biggest customers," he said.

While Mr. Baltazar characterizes his experience in the culinary industry as a deaf person as "difficult," today he said: "Communication is relative. Food does not care what language you speak."

Starting Noms, a business based on their terms and defined by their creativity, said Ms. Palazzo allowed the pair to break away from discrimination. She admitted there's often a learning curve with non-deaf customers and those who aren't fluent in American Sign Language, but after one visit, "communication becomes a non-issue."

Over the past year-plus, the two have found membership in the Worcester Regional Food Hub integral to their growth and awareness of the Noms brand.

Utilizing the commercial kitchen at the Greendale People's Church allowed them to "set a strong foundation" prior to establishing a possible brick and mortar space of their own, said Mr. Baltazar. The central location, business support, and connections to local farms and fellow food businesses, he added, are all top reasons membership is valuable. Ms. Palazzo is thankful for the patience Food Hub Director Shon Rainford has shown as they get the brand up and running, adding: "We owe much of our initial success to the Food Hub and will forever be grateful for their support."

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LEFT: At the time of publication, 403 Main St. was covered with scaffolding. Here is a historical photograph of the building in the late-19th to early-20th century. / PHOTO COURTESY MENKITI GROUP

MENKITI, FROM PAGE 1

be in Worcester and data-driven reasons to be in the Theatre District [and Downtown],” he added. However, when it comes to specific buildings “feel and context” play a role in the final decision.

“The broader macroeconomic, demographic, and lifestyle trends point to continued population growth in Worcester and we’re looking within that broader context for neighborhoods with strong existing assets but which have been undervalued.”

While those are foundational underlinings of his investment thesis, the checklist Mr. Menkiti holds when deciding whether or not to take on a new project – for example, 403, 526, or 554 Main St. – is four-pronged.

“It’s a combination of utility, potential, architecture, and how [these structures] fit within the context of the community,” he said. Yes, part of the equation is “architectural character,” often the

return a structure to the community as an active member of society.

Watching as the Menkiti Group strategically winds its way, the City of Worcester is pleased. The firm, said City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., has had an “immediate impact” on the city by helping residents and businesses better understand the “ideology behind downtown development and its ability to effect social change.”

The key, added the city manager, is their application of mixed-use space.

“To achieve an 18-hour day, we need downtown to not only be the central business district, but also a neighborhood where people return after their work day,” he said.

Apartments are necessary, but add ground-floor retail to the equation, explained Mr. Augustus, and “pedestrian engagement” entices both daytime office workers and residents.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR THE COMMUNITY

Cognizant of his presence as an outside developer, and the role of the community already present in the city, Mr. Menkiti’s economic development is designed to work in tandem with multiple local factors – especially so in Worcester.

Jessica Walsh, owner of Worcester Wares, was impressed by the research and in-person conversations about the trajectory of the city Mr. Menkiti conducted prior to investing. She remembers a specific conversation in which he asked why she would dedicate her business model to the love and loyalty to one city, and if she thought it were sustainable.

“I had no problem talking his ear off about how indeed there is that much love for this city,” said Ms. Walsh. “Worcester is this thing people should jump on because there is momentum and at the time, not everybody on the outside understood that.”

That intrigue, and Mr. Menkiti’s inquisitiveness, especially as an out-of-state let alone out-of-region developer, reassured Ms. Walsh, now a 12-year resident of Worcester, that her idea was catching and there was more momentum yet to come.

“It was exciting to see someone with his background, his success, looking at Worcester,” she said.

Here, unlike other cities, she continued, the momentum and success of one local industry is a shared commodity – something Ms. Walsh saw in Mr. Menkiti’s strategy.

“If one small business is making it other small businesses are making

it. What’s causing Worcester to move fast is the understanding that it’s not every man for themselves,” she said adding Mr. Menkiti “came to the table knowing that.”

For his knowledge-first, renovation-second approach, Mr. Menkiti was asked to be the keynote speaker at the fifth annual Economic Development Summit hosted by Bowditch & Dewey in November.

“Whereas other investors might be more worried about instant return on investment, the Menkiti Group is not afraid to transform a neighborhood one building at a time, taking the long view,” said Donna Truex, a partner in the Bowditch & Dewey law firm’s real estate department.

“Sometimes the small things make a big difference,” she said adding she would like to see the national attention the Menkiti Group has spurred for Worcester catch among other high-level development firms.

Mr. Menkiti too hopes to see continued momentum. In particular, he would like to see Main South and Downtown, in a decade, be “thriving, diverse, and culturally-vibrant neighborhoods contributing to the city as a whole.”

His success – and that of everyone from the city’s economic development team to the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, investors like Cliff Rucker to the Canal District entrepreneurs – relies on the impression Ms. Walsh had of Mr. Menkiti all those years prior.

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TAXATION, FROM PAGE 1

in Fitchburg have been occurring gradually over the past 10 years with annual 2 percent increases with an aim of eventually lining up residential and business assessments.

Fitchburg City Council President Michael P. Kushmerek was quoted in October 2019 by the *Sentinel & Enterprise* in favor of a single tax rate. He said: “The sooner we can get to a singular tax rate, the better off we’ll be as a community and the better off business will be. I think we can do better as a city in terms of economic growth. There’s always room to improve.”

Mr. DiNatale said he is “hoping” that companies that have left Fitchburg will return due to the tax changes, and that will “ultimately benefit homeowners.”

FOR NOW, WORCESTER MAINTAINS STATUS QUO

All signs point to Worcester remaining among the 32.5 percent of Bay State communities continuing to operate with a dual-rate structure, but there’s perennial support among some city councilors for a move like Fitchburg’s.

“I have always supported narrowing the gap between our residential and commercial tax rate,” said Worcester Mayor and Councilor-at-Large Joseph M. Petty in a statement.

“No matter how large or small, no matter how rich or poor, every city and town in Massachusetts takes the same vote to set a tax rate,” he added of the back and forth seen in recent Worcester votes over the years. “In Worcester we’ve kept taxes manageable by growing our unused levy capacity to the highest in our city’s history, and that has led to improved bond ratings and decreasing our borrowing rate.”

Two of the mayor’s colleagues – District 5 Councilor Matt Wally and Councilor-at-Large Kathleen Toomey – agree a single tax rate would benefit the city.

While Ms. Toomey said “[we] can’t fix [it] overnight,” Mr. Wally added there would be “a good benefit to provide a little more relief to commercial [taxpayers].”

He admits the city is “years” away from switching to a single tax rate for residential and commercial taxpayers but has an idea of how that could come about. “We need to make the environment more attractive, shrink what is now a significant [rate] gap” between property-tax rates for residential customers and commercial and industrial taxpayers, said the District 5 councilor.

Mr. Petty, Ms. Toomey, and Mr. Wally all voted against the Worcester tax plan adopted by the council in December.

In getting to a single rate, she said, “we need a balanced, moderate range” which will depend on first seeing “increased values” for business properties.

Ms. Toomey did comment that residential property owners have recently seen substantial increases in their property valuations.

Given the lower housing costs, Boston-based companies and employees looking for lower costs

of living are looking to Worcester as “the place to be,” she said.

“There is tremendous movement” in Worcester’s favor from in-state and out-of-state parties, she explained. In fact, per Ms. Toomey’s count, the city has issued more than 1,000 building permits – including residential, commercial – between 2018 and 2019 and new businesses have contributed roughly \$6 million in added revenue to the city.

WHAT’S TO COME WITH INCREASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN WORCESTER

Mr. Wally did not take the Fitchburg Council’s decision as a message to Worcester, but a decision made “in the best interest” of Fitchburg. “We have to be cognizant about looking to attract other businesses and the cost of doing business here,” he said of Worcester.

Fitchburg implemented its new arrangement immediately, but Mr. Wally advised a two-year transition for Worcester taxpayers to adjust to a universal rate. A phase-in, he explained, would lessen burdens or prevent hardships on homeowners.

Economic factors to consider, he added, are the valuations of homes from year to year and whether or not a recession is on the horizon. Businesses must be incentivized, he said, to “reinvest profits into their businesses” when it comes to attracting additional commerce to Worcester.

On Feb. 11, the city council unanimously approved a tax-increment financing plan, or TIF, for Table Talk Pies to relocate its headquarters and production facility from Kelley Square to the South Worcester Industrial Park. Mr. Wally said such a package will make the new factory possible but indicated that providing a “more attractive tax-rate environment” would allow businesses to “stay and grow without a TIF,” in his opinion.

Alex Guardiola, Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce director of government affairs and public policy, said a TIF is vital in situations like this. “A TIF is the only tool we have because of the consistent increases in commercial tax rates approved by the city council over the past five years.”

Looking forward, hopefully to more businesses relocating or launching in Worcester, Mr. Petty said: “We’re seeing the limits of Proposition 2½ and I’m pleased that the state legislature is taking a look at possible changes. A recent *Boston Globe* article pointed out many of the communities with the highest tax rates are west of Worcester, small rural communities, while some of our poorest communities have the highest tax rates in the state. Across the Commonwealth we’re seeing communities pushing their property owners to the breaking point as they struggle with budgets, liabilities, and unfunded mandates. Ultimately, we need creative solutions for raising revenue locally and a more progressive form of property tax that incentivizes growth and allows cities and towns to meet their needs, remain competitive, and provide vital services to our communities,” said Mr. Petty.

BACA HIRED AS FOOD HUB SALES OPERATIONS MANAGER

By Chamber Staff

As of Jan. 20, Huong Baca assumed the role of sales operations manager at the Worcester Regional Food Hub.

In this position, Ms. Baca, a native of Vietnam but a graduate of Worcester Technical High School, will ensure local, healthy food is easily available to all within Worcester County.

“I am very excited that Huong is joining the team at the Food Hub. She brings a well of knowledge which is going to benefit our partner farmers and chefs tremendously,” said Food Hub Director Shon Rainford.

Interacting on a near-daily basis with the farmers of Central Massachusetts, Ms. Baca will match their harvests with the needs of chefs and retailers locally.

“Much of her work will be building relationships with food and beverage directors, chefs, and market managers so they understand the bounty the Food Hub can provide including fruits and vegetables, meats, eggs, cheeses, maple syrup, honey, grains, and flour,” said Mr. Rainford.

Marketing of Food Hub member products to these outlets – including Nutty Bird Granola, Teaquinox, SpiceNectar, Minuteman KettleCorn, AZ Nordic Kvass, and Bali Marle, among others – will also be under Ms. Baca’s purview.

The position was previously held by Joey Hersh. “[He] has been a great asset to the Food Hub and I wish him well as he pursues new ventures in farming and permaculture,” said Mr. Rainford.

Previously, Ms. Baca worked as an account representative at SYGMA Network Inc., a division of Sysco, for 10 years. During that time, she worked to develop relationships with SYGMA Network customers and aid them in product ordering processes. While SYGMA customers included restaurant chains and independent franchises, the scope of her clientele will broaden.

As Food Hub sales operations manager, Ms. Baca will translate that experience to interactions with Central Massachusetts farmers, vendors, restaurateurs, and consumers.

As a six-year-old, Ms. Baca emigrated with her family from Vietnam in 1986 where they had worked as farmers. She draws her passion and inspiration for agriculture and landscaping from that aspect of her early life. What she’s learned working firsthand in the industry has led Ms. Baca to prioritize a healthy lifestyle.

A Worcester resident, today she enjoys being active both at the gym and in outdoor recreational activities such as running and hiking with her husband and children.

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SAINT VINCENT HOSPITAL DEBUTS HYBRID OPERATING ROOM

By **Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent**

The health care industry in Central Massachusetts continues to grow and expand – and Worcester’s Saint Vincent Hospital is no exception.

In December, Saint Vincent opened a hybrid operating room – an O.R. featuring a “state-of-the-art, high-end imaging system” for endovascular and cardiac procedures, said Melinda Darrigo, senior director of operations and executive director for heart and vascular services.

Unlike a chest x-ray, for example, which provides a snapshot or a static image of the chest, this imaging system is almost like a “constant, continuous x-ray,” Director of Cardiac Endoscopy Services Bethanne Mazzola explained. It allows the physician to see everything happening inside a patient in real-time as they navigate catheters into the body to visualize specific areas in need of evaluation or treatment.

Built to meet patient needs, Ms. Darrigo says this room can accommodate a wide range of procedures from the less complex, such as looking at the blood flow of a leg, to the intricate, such as placing large stents or grafts in major blood vessels.

Dr. John Najjar, chief of vascular surgery, describes the hybrid O.R. as “the crown jewel” of the “endovascular revolution” which has



ABOVE: Last month, Saint Vincent Hospital announced the launch of its new hybrid operating room designed as a special suite for patients undergoing advanced endovascular and cardiac procedures. / PHOTO COURTESY SAINT VINCENT HOSPITAL

been taking place since the 1990s. That is, technology advancement in the last decades has allowed for procedures which traditionally required open vascular surgeries to evolve into minimally-invasive endovascular procedures.

This means the operation can be done from within the blood vessel eliminating the need to make an incision. And access to the hybrid room – “the crown jewel, the best available technology” – Dr. Najjar said, means physicians can now complete endovascular procedures “with better imaging, more accuracy, and hopefully get better results.”

While operations on aneurysms, carotid arteries, and other similar cases primarily performed in this

room have existed for a long time, the technology provided by the hybrid O.R. offers minimally-invasive alternatives which allow for shorter operation and quicker recovery times, among other benefits. “From a patient perspective,” Ms. Mazzola argued, “that’s preferred.”

Though this isn’t the only local hybrid O.R. – other hospitals, including UMass Memorial Medical Center, have them – Ms. Darrigo said the addition to Saint Vincent provides patients with “access and choice.” Between providers and insurers, Central Mass residents “now have more choices for where they can go for services,” she said, adding that this allows Saint Vincent to offer services they previously

could not. CEO Carolyn Jackson echoed this sentiment saying the room responds to one of Saint Vincent’s overarching goals of keeping patients in the Worcester market for their care.


Bringing “high-end technology to a medium-sized, high-quality organization like Saint Vincent,” which also gives the “hometown feel” to patients, she said, ensures local residents can get the care they need right in their own backyard – no need to drive to Boston.

Simultaneously, construction of the hybrid O.R. expands their already “very robust cardiovascular program” and service line, Ms. Jackson said. “We’ve been trying to round out our portfolio, and this is another key piece.”

Ultimately, Dr. Najjar said, it shows Saint Vincent and parent company Tenet Healthcare are “investing large resources into the cardiovascular program here ... and that means they care about getting better results and setting themselves apart as a center of excellence.”

Demonstrating their commitment to the community as they continue to grow their services, Saint Vincent’s latest investment in a hybrid O.R. is just one example of how local health care institutions are responding to the growing demands of the area, keeping pace with Worcester as the city too continues to grow.

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RAILERS' COMMUNITY OUTREACH EXPECTS TO SURPASS 6K WPS FOURTH GRADERS THROUGH SKATE TO SUCCESS PROGRAM

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent

Lacing up and hitting the ice – that’s what Worcester Public Schools’ fourth graders are doing every Tuesday from September through late March thanks to the Worcester Railers’ Skate to Success program.

Now in its third year and fully-funded by the Worcester Railers Foundation; as well as multiple, locally-based sponsors, not to mention Chamber members, The Hanover Insurance Group, Fallon Health, the Worcester Business Development Corporation; the program aims to provide opportunity and access to WPS students who otherwise may never have the chance to try ice skating. At its core, Skate to Success is a learn-to-skate initiative.

As part of their flagship community engagement campaign, each Tuesday, approximately 75 WPS students arrive by bus to the Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center where they’re greeted by Railers team members, staff, and coaches; program volunteers; sponsors; and

other special guests including NHL alumni.

After a brief chat in the stands, the students get suited up with skates and helmets provided specifically for the program.

Following almost an hour of skate time, the students are treated to a free lunch and take-home Railers goodies such as jerseys, school supplies, and an autograph from team mascot Trax.

The program – which serves roughly 2,000 WPS students each year – is part of the team’s educational outreach efforts, Railers President Mike Myers said, and plays into their overall mission of being more than just a hockey club or an ice rink.

The team, which strives to be known as a “community first” organization in greater Worcester, hopes to both educate students about ice skating, the game of hockey, and the Railers presence in the city.

When envisioning the team’s home prior to its creation, Mr. Myers and team owner Cliff Rucker knew they wanted the Canal District ice center

to be “more than just a box with rinks and a concession stand. We wanted it to be a neighborhood-friendly space with programming that backed that up,” Mr. Myers explained.

And this “community-minded mission,” as Mr. Myers puts it, is why Railers’ community service efforts don’t end with the Skate to Success program. The team and staff also partake in a number of other community-related events – so much so, they’ve earned multiple national recognitions.

For their more than 2,100 community service hours throughout the 2018-19 season, the ECHL chose the Railers, out of 27 teams, as the recipient of the Community Service Team of the Year award. The NHL recognized Skate to Success for aligning with their Declaration of Principles, an initiative which aims to advance programs and policies across all leagues to create the best possible experience for the entire hockey community.

And, most recently, USA Hockey Magazine produced a feature on the program. The article can be found in their January 2020 magazine.

In fact, inspired by the program here in Worcester, other teams have reached out to the Railers, expressing their interest in starting something similar in their

jurisdictions. Likewise, the ECHL and NHL are currently looking to create larger-scale learn-to-skate programs, encouraging kids to try hockey and working to grow the game.

Calling these acknowledgements “extremely humbling,” Paul Harris, Railers community relations manager, said it demonstrates how they’ve “really lived up” to their initial vision of being “more than just a team.”

Of their other efforts, including participation in Thanksgiving food drives, partnership with the Bravehearts on the “Ticket to Read” program in local schools, and donations of academic supplies, to name a few; Mr. Harris simply said: “Worcester is our home. We want everyone to think of the Railers as a support and we want to be there to provide for the community.”

He added, “We firmly believe we’re a community-first team, and that if you invest in the community, they’ll invest in you.”

By March, the hockey club expects to celebrate the milestone of serving 6,000 students since launching the Skate to Success program in September of 2017 – an accomplishment which Mr. Myers says they take pride in and are “really looking to expand on in the next couple of years.”



ABOVE: A recent cohort of Skate to Success participants pose on the ice at the Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center. **BELOW:** Railers staff and team members interact with WPS students during a recent Skate to Success session. / PHOTOS COURTESY WORCESTER RAILERS.



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MEET STARTUP WORCESTER: ACCL MARKETING; 2019-20



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Avyay Chaganty, Cody Lavallee
COMPANY: ACCL Marketing
AGES: 23
HOMETOWNS:
Bridgewater, N.J.; Burrillville, R.I.; respectively
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Mare E Monti Trattoria, Mezcal Tequila Cantina
FAVORITE DOWN TIME LOCATION:
Wachusett Mountain, and The Beer Garden
LEFT: Avyay Chaganty (left) and Cody Lavallee (right). /
PHOTO COURTESY ACCL MARKETING

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent

Everyone loves a good story. And that’s what Becker College graduates (’18) Avyay Chaganty and Cody Lavallee recognized when launching their startup, ACCL Marketing.

A “full-service marketing agency focused on gaining positive exposure for brands that ultimately drive sales,” as Mr. Lavallee put it, ACCL Marketing offers a wide spectrum of marketing services including photography, graphic and website design, and social media management.

Mr. Changanty and Mr. Lavallee met at Becker College, both majoring in business administration with a concentration in marketing. Sharing a passion for clothing, shoes, and fashion, the duo quickly realized their love for these products actually stemmed from marketing and brand promotion.

That fascination, coupled with their desire to “start something” together – even if they didn’t initially know exactly what that “something” was, Mr. Chaganty admitted – is where ACCL’s story begins.

As they continued to study marketing, and intern at different agencies, the two noticed there was a heavy focus on analytics but “wasn’t as much of a focus on the art or creative side of marketing,” Mr. Chaganty recalled.

Identifying what they saw as a missed opportunity by many contemporary marketing firms, the two were determined to start an agency of their own based in storytelling and creativity rather than “cookie-cutter analytics,” Mr. Lavallee explained. This became increasingly important as they realized many small local businesses have “such unique stories,” said Mr. Chaganty, that “aren’t being highlighted” in their brand.

In January 2018 it was decided: this was what they wanted to do after graduation. Following a strong suggestion to apply to the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce’s StartUp Worcester program from their friend Timothy Loew, executive director of MassDIGI, the pair were accepted

into the 2019-20 cohort. Now, two years in, ACCL still sees their storytelling capabilities as what sets them apart. According to Mr. Lavallee, “All businesses are competing for attention and the best way to get that attention is to tell a great story.” To do so, Mr. Chaganty said listening to a client’s origins and building marketing accordingly “leads to better traction.”

To that end, added Mr. Lavallee, “everything is personalized. You’re not getting a cookie cutter package anyone can use. You’re getting content tailored to your business.”

Since launching, ACCL has worked with Becker College, United Way of Central Massachusetts, and New Jersey-based Rowden Opticians. Their team has grown to three full-time employees as well as contracted workers.

They chalk up some of their success to the support of StartUp Worcester and the Chamber – most notably, the networking opportunities. Of meeting business owners through Chamber events, Mr. Chaganty says, “it’s important to continue to grow [our] brand since we’re so young and new. ... Being a part of something like the Chamber has let us really share our story.”

The two also named access to centralized office space, SCORE mentorship, and a support system among StartUp Worcester alumni, as some of the most helpful resources.

From these collaborations, Mr. Chaganty says he can see that some will eventually “become powerhouses,” and when they do, “it’ll be cool to say ‘we’ve worked with them.’ ... It’s going to pay dividends.”

When asked about aspirations, the two seek to add more medium and large businesses to their portfolio, expand to other industries, and promote all of their team members to full-time.

As for the original passion, it hasn’t been forgotten. “We’d love to get into clothing or fashion,” Mr. Lavallee said, but for now, ACCL is focused on growing general clientele. He added: “If a business “has a story, we’re willing to tell it.”



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By Kristen Luna, Membership Sales & Services

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Contact the Chamber's member services representative Kristen Luna at 508.753.2924, ext. 226 or kluna@worcesterchamber.org with questions or to upgrade your listing or membership type.

MEET LEADERSHIP WORCESTER: SARAH CONNELL SANDERS '18

By Sarah Connell Sanders, Correspondent

I grew up all over Worcester. At various times in my childhood, we lived off Vernon Hill, Park Avenue, June Street, and Hamilton Street. I thought I had an intimate knowledge of my city, but I realize now that there was plenty I couldn't see. There still is.

As a Worcester Public Schools student, my teacher and swim coach Gail Holland helped shape me into an accomplished student-

athlete. I remember her pride and support when Fordham University recruited me to join its NCAA Division I swim program during my senior year.

College swimming taught me to have grit and determination in all of my pursuits. After I graduated with my bachelor's degree in English and education, it was hard to imagine life on dry land. I began trading blog posts for pool time at Worcester Fitness – an arrangement I eventually parlayed into a column for Worcester Magazine.

I spent the first decade of my teaching career in the Auburn Public Schools. Like many educators, I was leading a double life.

Most evenings, I drove to Boston College where I was completing my Masters in education. On nights when I didn't have class, I would pick up shifts at Armsby Abbey where I worked as a server.

Worcester became a hectic waypoint rather than the vibrant destination I've since come to know.

I was living 25 miles west of the city at a residential summer camp for at-risk youth, which I had attended as a kid. I earned my keep by writing grants and helping out with off-season maintenance tasks. I loved teaching swim lessons in the summertime, but camp felt excruciatingly remote the rest of the year.

In the fall of 2016, I moved back to my hometown. City life was different than I remembered. Many of the vacant manufacturing buildings from my childhood had been repurposed as lofts and unique retail spaces. I began to see Worcester with fresh eyes.

My newfound network encouraged me to apply for Leadership Worcester's Class of 2018 and my mentors in the Auburn Public Schools supported me when I was accepted. The Rotary Club in Auburn even awarded me a scholarship to help cover tuition.

I looked forward to joining an eclectic cohort of passionate professionals to learn about public safety, government, sustainability, economic development, culture, and health care. Throughout the



ABOVE: Leadership Worcester alumna Sarah Connell Sanders. / PHOTO BY MIKE HENDRICKSON

program, I designed community service learning opportunities for Auburn's students that aligned with our sessions.

When alumni describe Leadership Worcester as a "hands-on experience," it's no joke.

During orientation, I asked City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. a question about the library and, within a week, I received a request to sit on the board of the Worcester Public Library Foundation – of which I became the communications committee chair.

On my ride-along with the Worcester Police Department, I witnessed such levels of care and compassion that I was moved to write a cover story for Worcester Magazine about community

policing. Leadership Worcester wasn't just showing off my city, it was building an army of engaged citizens all around me.

I'll admit that the session I was least excited about was

the one dedicated to education. I assumed it would feel like another day at the office. It turned out to be the day that changed my life. When we boarded a van for Burncoat Middle School, I had no idea I was about to get a glimpse of the future.

At BMS, students literally danced through the halls; I found the building's creative culture invigorating. I thought of teachers like Mrs. Holland who had believed in me and made me feel like a part of the community. I knew it was time to come home.

This year, I began my new role as the media and library specialist at BMS. I help students plan and execute civic engagement projects on a daily basis in hopes that they will fall in love with Worcester just like I did.

I'm not sure I would have ever considered a lane change after 10 years in the same school system without the motivation of Leadership Worcester. The program empowered me to take meaningful action in the community. If you let it, it could do the same for you.

"The program empowered me to take meaningful action in the community. If you let it, it could do the same for you."



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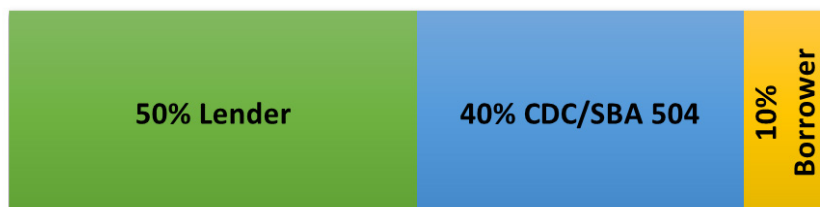
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WORCESTER SPORTS STREET: REALIZING THE WORCESTER RED SOX DREAM, HOCKEY'S DO-OR-DIE TIME, ARENA FOOTBALL SEASON

By Timothy P. Murray, Chamber President & CEO

As spring approaches, and many New England sports fans watch, wonder, and debate the future of the New England Patriots' star quarterback Tom Brady and the merits, or lack thereof, in the Red Sox recent trade of Mookie Betts, there's lots of local scuttlebutt to discuss.

But first, on behalf of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce staff and myself, our hearts go out to the family of Grace Rett, the Holy Cross women's crew team, and the college's greater community on their loss. May you grow stronger together through this terrible tragedy.

WORCESTER RED SOX

It won't be long before the City of Worcester, and the forthcoming Worcester Red Sox, are part of numerous daily baseball conversations pertaining to everything from the future players for the parent club, the Boston Red Sox, to the amenities at the new stadium and who will throw the first pitch.

The Boston Red Sox new general manager, Chaim Bloom, has gained a reputation as having a keen eye for talent and the development of prospects through the baseball farm system during his tenure in Tampa



LEFT: Construction on Polar Park continues in this January 2020 photo as the diamond-shaped ballpark takes shape. / PHOTO COURTESY WOO SOX

have plans to significantly reinvest in each structure. And the interest doesn't end there. Currently, multiple additional investors are working with city and Chamber officials discussing projects that are soon to be announced.

Bay. Expect much of the same based on the charge given Mr. Bloom by the Boston Red Sox's ownership when he was rehired in October 2019.

As a result, it will be interesting to see the lineup. There may be a lot of shuffling of players between Worcester's Polar and Fenway parks beginning April 2021 when play commences here.

Watching top-notch baseball right around the corner from the office, or a short train ride away, is another good reason for local business and political leaders to continue to push for expanded commuter rail service between the capital and the Heart of the Commonwealth.

SPORTS-RELATED INVESTMENT

Another, more timely, Worcester

Red Sox note comes as the result of a modified proposal presented by City of Worcester city manager, Edward M. Augustus Jr., to the city council. The memo regarded both the construction of Polar Park, the portion of the project funded by public dollars, as well as the private sector development adjacent to the ballpark site.

While the total cost of the ballpark's construction has risen by nearly \$10 million (\$9.4 million), as outlined in Mr. Augustus' modified proposal, the timeline of the private sector development taken on by Madison Downtown Holdings has been cut in half. What was initially planned as two phases has now been combined.

That's not all though. Madison Downtown Holdings will be adding the construction of a second, 60,000-sq.-ft. office building and is nearly doubling the number of market-rate housing units to a minimum 350 apartments total throughout the project.

These new homes will create a density of residents within the neighborhood – not to mention ensure a population of future customers for Canal District and Green Island businesses.

The expansion of the project, as well as nominal increases to the parking and ticket fees, will ensure it continues to pay for itself. That being said, a ticket to a Woo Sox game will start at \$11 – an affordable outing for everyone from a young family to an elderly resident on a fixed income.

Beyond the tenants of the ballpark agreement, and those of the adjacent development district, interest in the city as a whole has steadily increased since the team's relocation announcement in August 2018 and the Chamber has been there throughout to guide and inform interested parties.

Through its recruitment efforts, the Chamber has worked hand-in-hand with Synergy Investments, the firm behind the recent acquisition of the Worcester Plaza Building known colloquially as the "Glass Tower" (\$16.5 million) as well as Benedict Canyon Equities' \$28.8 million purchase of the Skymark Tower on Main and Austin streets.

Both developers talked about the Polar Park project as a significant factor in their decision to invest in the City of Worcester and

AS PLAYOFFS APPROACH, ITS HOCKEY'S DO-OR-DIE TIME

The hockey all-star break for the NHL, AHL, and ECHL has passed and it is make or break time for teams looking to secure a spot in the playoffs.

One local team looking to do just that is the Worcester Railers.

While the Railers' intensity and pace of play has picked up following their recent coaching change, playoff points have been elusive for the Worcester-based organization. Let's hope the team can put some consecutive wins together soon.

However, the team's community efforts have received national-level praise this winter. On page 19, former Chamber marketing and communications associate Dominique Goyette-Connerty takes a deep dive into the Railers' three-year-old Skate to Success program.

On March 7, together with the team, the Chamber is hosting its annual member appreciation night. For free tickets to the Railers' game please see our Sports Street Trivia question at the end of the column. If you can guess one, or both, of the correct answers to those trivia questions we will reserve two tickets in your name at the DCU will call box that evening.

ARENA FOOTBALL, BACK IN SEASON

The Massachusetts Pirates, who begin arena football play at the DCU Center with the start of their season in April, recently announced their new head coach Patrick Pass.

This name should be familiar to many New England Patriots fans as Mr. Pass played for the NFL team for six seasons from 2000 to 2006.

A versatile member of the Patriots, after being drafted by Head Coach Bill Belichick in the seventh round of the 2000 NFL draft, Mr. Pass served as running back, fullback, receiver, and as a member of the special teams unit.

TICKET SWEEPSTAKES

Provide correct answers to either of the questions by email to vparent@worcesterchamber.org and win two free tickets to the March 7 Chamber Member Appreciation Night.

1. What was the nickname for the Worcester Vocational School's athletic teams prior to "Bulldogs" and the current Worcester Tech nickname of "Eagles?"

2. What was the nickname of the Bancroft School athletic teams prior to their current "Bulldog" moniker?



WORCESTER REGIONAL
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Just what is a Chamber?

Most of us have heard of a chamber of commerce. But, just what does one do?

HERE'S THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION: *A chamber is an organization, formed voluntarily, by business owners seeking to further their collective interests, while improving their communities with the goal of creating economic prosperity by advancing business interests. Goals include:*

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For more info or to join, contact Kristen Luna | 508.753.2924, ext. 226
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Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

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