



Facing Grim Outlook, Member Businesses Adapt and Get Innovative to Keep Doors Open

Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent

There's no denying the U.S. is currently confronting one of the most significant public health crises in modern history, coupled with crippling economic turmoil, it's been mostly bad news.

Now, more than nine months since the first known case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Massachusetts, the state has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country at 9.6%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. At the time of writing, more than 365,000 people of the Commonwealth's workforce are without a job.

The pandemic and related financial fallout are showing little signs of slowing, as the country faces what's frequently being dubbed as the "second surge," with case numbers and the daily positive test rate rising back to levels seen at the virus' spring peak.

And the Worcester area isn't immune to coronavirus-caused closures. Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce member businesses Creative Catering, Cherry Blow Dry Bar, and Corner Grille are among those which have shut their doors since March; Armsby Abbey, The Beer Garden, and

the DCU Center, have implemented temporary closures in the name of pandemic-presented obstacles.

While some sectors are projected to bounce back quicker than others, for many right now, the future looks bleak. We're taking a look at the challenges local businesses across different industries are dealing with, the necessary adjustments they're making, and the innovative solutions they're engineering to stay open.

RESTAURANT AND CATERING

Take Nuestra, for example. The authentic Puerto Rican cuisine restaurant opened up shop on January 6, affording them only a couple months of normalcy before the coronavirus effectively turned the world on its side. "We haven't even gotten into a regular rhythm; we don't know what a regular rhythm is," said Owner Natalie Rodriguez.

Though they never shut their doors, the new eatery had to transition to takeout-only, as sit-down dining was originally prohibited. Ms. Rodriguez says they were already doing a lot of takeout and felt well-prepared to exclusively operate that way, but now

had to make several adjustments including buying more to-go containers, figuring out how to package meals to prevent them from getting soggy and ensuring that the food looked as good as it typically did when served on a plate. They also had to quickly activate online ordering and implement curbside pickup.

Even when sit-down dining was given the green light to resume, Nuestra opted out due to their "small dining room" with "already tight spaces," Ms. Rodriguez said, and didn't bother pursuing an outdoor dining setup either.

For the new restaurateur, the biggest challenge has simply been getting people to order food in the first place. With catering orders being scratched as gatherings were reduced in size or postponed altogether, Ms. Rodriguez says they've missed out on those larger money-makers and the whole graduation party season.

In an effort to keep attracting customers, Nuestra is mixing up their specials to offer unique dishes no one else is, hoping "people eat with their eyes before they eat with their stomachs," as she put it.

Calling COVID-19 "a sort of blessing in disguise" for how the community has come together to support one another, Ms. Rodriguez said it certainly hasn't been the start to the business she was looking for, but they've "learned from it, grown from it, and just keep pushing on."

TEE's Deli and Catering, on the other hand, is another story. Owner Tom Erickson's main job is running the cafeteria at National Grid's Worcester location, but he's permitted to do outside catering jobs. His biggest clients besides the electric company are the athletic departments of both College of the Holy Cross and WPI. "Since early March, I've had absolutely zero catering jobs from Holy Cross and WPI," Mr. Erickson said, adding that while there are normally 300 people working in the National Grid building, the company has gone mostly remote, with no more than 50 people now working in-person.

In June, National Grid temporarily shut down the cafeteria, leaving TEE's with the sole option of outside catering gigs – which are proving to be

SEE OUTLOOK, PAGE 9

bankHometown, WBDC, Others Support Chamber

By Sharyn T. Williams, VP, Marketing, Communications, Programs, and Events

In June, just weeks after the coronavirus hit the region, Robert J. Morton, president and CEO of bankHometown approached the Chamber with an idea.

With support from the bank's board of directors and gratitude from the Chamber's staff and board, on June 11, the \$25,000 challenge grant was announced. The bank pledged to match dollar-for-dollar all donations made to the Chamber by members of the business community through Labor Day, up to \$25,000.

The grant challenge was made with the hope and intent that other businesses would step up to help the Chamber sustain its programs and services in support of local businesses who have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"bankHometown salutes the Worcester Regional Chamber on their unwavering support of the small business community day in and day out, but especially during this pandemic. We were pleased

to fulfill our \$25,000 funding commitment to help ensure the Chamber's services could continue uninterrupted," said Robert J. Morton, bankHometown President and CEO. "With this grant and the recent opening of our second branch here in Worcester, we reinforce our commitment to community banking, to the Chamber, and to small business owners and residents across this city."

And they did step up. Most notably, Craig Blais, president and CEO of WBDC announced that they would match the challenge made by bankHometown.

In a ribbon cutting and check presentation ceremony at the newly opened bankHometown branch location on Grove Street in Worcester, Morton, Blais, and a small group of representatives presented Tim Murray, the Chamber's president and CEO with checks from their respective organizations.

SEE GRANT, PAGE 8



(L-R) FRONT: Robert J. Hennigan, Jr., chair - WBDC; Craig L. Blais, president and CEO - WBDC; Robert D. Cox, Jr., chair - Chamber; Timothy P. Murray, president and CEO - Chamber; Steven H. Duvarney, chair - bankHometown; Robert J. Morton, president and CEO - bankHometown. BACK: Joel Laureano, branch officer and Erika Heredia, assistant branch manager - bankHometown



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

Each quarter, 20,000 copies are mailed to 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 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 Sharyn Williams at swilliams@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.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

PLEASE NOTE
All events are
VIRTUAL unless
otherwise noted.

November

- 18 Financial Services Roundtable
- 18 Seminar Series: Developing a Strong LinkedIn Brand
- 19 Business After Hours
- 19 Healthcare Roundtable

December

- 4 145th Annual Meeting
- 9 Power of Women: Part 2 - Women of Color
- 10 The Breakfast Club
- 15 Seminar Series: How Influencers Capture the Most Powerful Drug in a Business: Attention
- 17 Business After Hours

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In Allston Interchange Debate, Don't Forget Grand Junction

On March 1, 2020, one of the biggest challenges facing major Massachusetts employers was how to reliably get their employees to work as they battled the worst traffic congestion in the country. Just one short week later, COVID-19 changed the conversation. The debate over transportation seemed to evaporate as everything about how we live, work, and commute changed. However, stopping the urgent debate about our state's transportation problems only delays the inevitable. Now is the time for us to create change that will make our state stronger for decades to come.

The Allston I-90 Interchange Project has the potential to do more than simply improve a small portion of the Mass Pike. This significant and important development, if done right, can offer a double victory of more safely getting commuters from the west into Boston and Cambridge, and the other way around. While MassDOT officials have taken steps in the right direction with their proposals, they fail to go the final mile on transit improvements.

Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack has said all three design options for the Allston I-90 Interchange



We have the opportunity to lay the track for rail service that would connect, for the first time, our growing innovation economies in Worcester, Metro-West, Harvard's Allston development, Kendall Square, and North Station. Innovation districts must continue to collaborate if we are going to build a better future. Imagine what this type of investment would look like for the average commuter. We could transform downtown Worcester into a restaurant and retail hub, open up jobs to the east and west for commuters in Worcester or Boston (and all the towns in between), and

Business leaders call for transit planning on rail line.

Project "do not preclude" future transit on the Grand Junction.

The Grand Junction is a rail bridge over the Charles River that connects to Cambridge and North Station.

Advocates have taken issue with that claim asserting that only the all at-grade solution will "enable" transit on the Grand Junction by forcing the state to reconstruct a small rail bridge over Storrow Drive. Regardless of the rhetoric, neither option will get commuters on the Grand Junction for at least a generation.

As we arrive at the 11th hour after six years of analysis and decision making, we call on Secretary Pollack and MassDOT to make a real plan about how the state will incorporate transit on the Grand Junction - to make sure that our future does more than just "not preclude" the possibility of transit. This is a complex project with a lot of stakeholders at the table and one of the things we all agree on - from Worcester to Metrowest to Cambridge is that transit on the Grand Junction is the right thing to do for our environment, for our communities, and for our economy.

With historically low ridership it's fair to ask: is transit still part of the equation? Well, as the leaders of three major business organizations, we're here to tell you - it is. We need safe, reliable transit to get our economy back on track, meet the challenges of climate change, future-proof for further growth, and address equity and access to jobs across the Commonwealth.

usher folks into Kendall Square's life sciences and technology epicenter. We'll see less crowding on trains, it will be easier to visit the Aquarium or catch a WooSox game, and we'll create vital connections for everyone in between.

The environmental benefits of adding rail service to Grand Junction will help us reach our state aspirations to "move people, not cars" more effectively. By electrifying a railway that runs adjacent to the highway, not only are we creating new options for people to get to work, but we are reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the number of cars on the road. The relationship between the health of the environment and the health of the community cannot be overlooked here. COVID-19 and the real risk of respiratory diseases has laid bare the need to make our air cleaner for everyone.

Transit on the Grand Junction is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a sustainable, equitable, and connected future for the Commonwealth, one we'll need sooner than later. Let's not let it pass us by.

STORY AUTHORS

Timothy Murray, President and CEO Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

C.A. Webb
President, Kendall Square Association

Robert Coughlin, President and CEO

Business Survival Hits Critical Mass

In an Already Expensive Area for Conducting Business, it's About to Get Even More Challenging

By Alex Guardiola, Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy

Move over blizzard of '78 there is a new king's tale that will monopolize the dinner table conversation for decades to come.

All my life I have heard about how awful the blizzard was. I've seen the pictures of cars buried in snow on I-290 and heard about how the entire city was shut down for one full week. Well, COVID-19 just told the blizzard of '78 to hold its beer.

WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Over the past nine months, we have seen health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic the likes which the country has not seen since the Spanish flu outbreak in 1918. It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths

People and companies are using platforms like Zoom, Webex, and others to conduct business as well as to socially interact. To see their grandchildren, grandparents have had to learn how to login and navigate this new platform. Friends and family are watching live streams of weddings, bar and batmitzvahs, and baptisms on Facebook and YouTube and doing their best to celebrate these important milestones. But little else has been more effected than the way we now conduct business.

THE GREAT RECESSION PALES TO THAT OF TODAY'S ECONOMIC CRISIS

In 2008, the United States went through what is now known as the "Great Recession" which was inextricably linked to the "sub-prime mortgage lending crisis." This eco-

DESPITE THEIR OWN CRISES, LOCAL BUSINESSES STEP UP TO HELP

Our region's manufacturing sector realized that they had an opportunity to play a large role in helping combat the spread of the virus. Many of them heard the call and pivoted from their normal production lines and began manufacturing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This shift helped our hospitals to treat patients, allowed our first responders to continue to assist those in jeopardy, and provided our small businesses a way to re-open safely after months of being shut down.

One of the hardest hit sectors in our region is our hospitality industry. They were the first to close and will be last to reopen. In fact, places like the DCU Center are still not open and, since the start of the pandemic, have lost millions of dollars due to the cancellation of all of its programing. One in five restaurants have closed - for good. While the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) helped some businesses stay afloat at the beginning of the shutdown, businesses continue to report to the Chamber that the funds received from the PPP have already been spent. If a second stimulus package does not come soon, they too will be forced to shutter their doors for good. These business owners feel the walls closing in on them. Not only are



they concerned about meeting payroll every week, paying their rent or commercial mortgage, they are also worried about their real estate tax bill from the City of Worcester.

IT'S ABOUT TO GET WORSE, BUT THE CITY COUNCIL CAN HELP

If there was ever a year that Worcester city councilors should help small businesses by setting an equitable tax rate - this is it. Many of our brick and mortar businesses have seen historic losses in 2020, and there's no end in sight. To make matters worse, many businesses face significant revenue losses along with a significant delay on a second stimulus deal, they are also about to

SEE TAX CLASSIFICATION, PAGE 5

THE RISING COSTS OF DOING BUSINESS

WHAT THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY IS UP AGAINST

Unemployment Assistance Trust Fund
Projected to have a \$5 billion deficit by the end of 2022, unemployment assistance premiums are expected to increase by \$319 per employee in 2021, a 60% increase to employers.

Healthcare Premiums
Expected increases will average of 7.9 percent or an average annual increase of \$8,808 for individual and \$24,084 for family coverage.

Paid Family and Medical Leave
The program that offers 12 to 16 weeks of paid family leave and 20 weeks of paid medical leave will cost employers an estimated \$1 billion - *plus* the cost of filling these vacant positions.

Minimum Wage
On January 1, 2021, just weeks from now, the minimum wage will increase by \$0.75 to \$13.50 for hourly workers (an additional \$1,560 per year) and \$.060 to \$5.55 for tipped employees.

Moratorium on Evictions and Foreclosures
The federal moratorium, expiring at year's end, does not cover commercial buildings and will undoubtedly result in small businesses evictions and foreclosures.

And this is on top of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Many businesses are barely hanging on and face additional, significant revenue losses. Along with a significant delay on a second stimulus deal, there is no relief in site for these hard-working small business owners.

was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States.

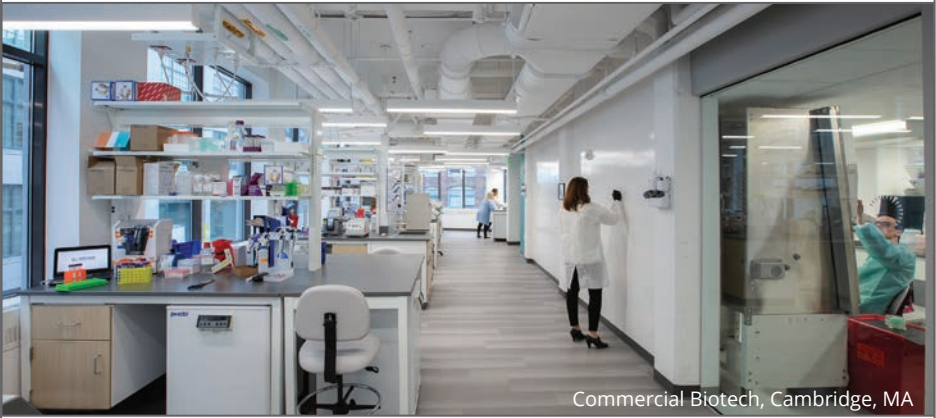
Currently, approximately 46.2 million across the globe have confirmed cases of COVID-19 and there have been 1.2 million deaths as a result. In the United States alone, there are 9.2 million confirmed cases and 230,000 deaths to date. With no vaccine readily available to the general population in the near future, these numbers are likely to increase.

LIFE AS WE KNOW IT IS CHANGED

This health pandemic has had many long-lasting ripple effects that have changed the way we will conduct our everyday lives. Holidays, weddings and birthdays have all been changed in many drastic ways.

conomic downturn caused millions of citizens to lose their homes, jobs, and life savings spiraling our economic ecosystem out of control. Its ripple effect caused thousands of companies to close for good. The auto industry and Wall Street had to be bailed out in order to right the road and get the country's economy back on track. While this was a dark time for our country, it may play second fiddle to what this current crisis has done and will continue to do to our economy.

While some businesses are surviving through creativity and maneuvering, how long can they continue to do business this way? Many, have not been so lucky.



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TAX CLASSIF., FROM PAGE 4

get hit with rising labor costs.

The unemployment assistance Trust Fund is projected to have a \$5 billion deficit by the end of 2022. Unemployment assistance premiums are expected to increase \$319 per employee in 2021, a 60% increase to employers.

As if that's not enough, despite the low use of benefits during the shutdown, healthcare premiums for small businesses will increase by an average of 7.9 percent. In dollars, that's an annual increase of \$8,808 for individual coverage and \$24,084 for family coverage.

The Paid Family and Medical Leave program will also take a toll. Estimates are that the program will cost employers \$1 billion when fully implemented, offering 12 to 26 weeks of paid family leave and 20 weeks of paid medical leave. In addition to the cost of the program, employers are also facing the costs of filling these positions while their employees are out on leave.

Moreover, the minimum wage is scheduled to increase by \$0.75 to \$13.50 for hourly workers (an added \$1,560 per full-time minimum wage per worker next year) and \$.060 to \$5.55 for tipped employees effective January 1, 2021.

If we combine all of these costs with the \$35.16 per \$1,000 tax rate levied on the commercial-industrial taxpayers, there is little hope for many of the city's small businesses.

Worcester city councilors must take into account that even if a small business owner does not own their building, many have a triple net lease. This type of lease requires

the tenant or lessee to pay all of the expenses of the property - including real estate taxes, building insurance, and maintenance. These payments are in addition to the monthly rent and utilities charges.

THIS YEAR IS THE YEAR FOR CHANGE

Every year the Chamber argues that we must have a fair and equitable tax rate in order to compete with surrounding towns and municipalities who boast a single tax rate.

On Nov. 9, the board of selectmen for the Town of Auburn voted to continue to narrow the tax gap between residents and businesses creating a more equitable distribution of the burden. While we must remain sensitive to residents and their own hardships in the short run, we can help the community by adding more businesses to our tax base thereby sharing the tax burden. A competitive tax rate is an important tool for attracting new businesses who are considering other communities as locations for their operations.

Lastly, Chapter 65 of the Acts of 2020, more commonly known as the state's "moratorium on evictions and foreclosures" ended on October 17, 2020. While some small businesses benefited from this moratorium, as residents did, others did not qualify. While the Federal moratorium is in place until the year's end, it does not cover commercial buildings. This lack of coverage will undoubtedly cause many small businesses to be evicted or foreclosed on.

If ever there was a year to strongly consider voting to narrow the tax gap between the residents and commercial-industrial taxpayers, this is the year.

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Partnerships Get Creative with Investments to Support Communities through Art

By Aviva Luttrell, Correspondent

The healing power of art is well documented, with studies showing numerous benefits for people dealing with issues ranging from anxiety to physical illness, so when UMass Memorial Health Care was looking to invest in projects aimed at improving the welfare of the community, it found a natural partnership in Creative Hub Worcester.

UMass Memorial recently granted the nonprofit arts and community development organization a \$500,000 investment loan to help transform Worcester’s former Ionic Avenue Boys Club into a center for creative and cultural programming. The \$14 million project, led by Creative Hub co-founders Laura Marotta and Stacy Lord, will convert the historic 1914 building into a dynamic ecosystem of creative offices, a visual arts maker space, classroom space with educational programming for underserved youth, an installation art gallery, private studio rentals, and a rooftop event venue.

“We want to provide residents with a place to commune, collaborate and network,” Lord said. “We’ve been invested in this neighborhood since we acquired the building four years ago.”

The former Boys Club, once a safe place for hundreds of children of immigrant families who came to the area during the manufacturing boom, has sat vacant for more than a decade. Marotta and Lord hope to bring the space full circle, beginning construction on the new Creative Hub Community Arts Center next year with a 2022 opening date.

“Laura and Stacy have a wonderful concept in mind. It’s a great building that has a long history of community engagement and collaboration,” UMass Memorial Community Hospitals President and Chief Administrative Officer Doug Brown said. “We know that art is a great way of transforming communities. We’ve seen it done again and again.”

Creative Hub’s project is among several community-based initiatives being funded by UMass Memorial. As part of its Anchor Mission, the health care system is redirecting 1 percent of its long-term investment portfolio – or \$4 million – to invest in local initiatives aimed at addressing social disadvantage and pervasive inequality.

The former Boys Club sits at the entrance to Worcester’s Main South

neighborhood and adjacent to Kelley Square, where Brown said the average life expectancy is just 73 years – lower than that of many developing countries. In the Kelley Square area, one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, 60 percent are on Medicare, and many do not have access to a vehicle, Brown said.

Just two miles away in Worcester’s west side, the average life expectancy jumps to 84 years.

“That’s unacceptable to us – an organization that’s committed to improving the health of our community,” Brown said. “If we take good care of people when they come inside our organization and send them back out and don’t address these social determinates of health, then we’re not living up to our mission.”

Creative Hub already provides programming at its nearby Youth Arts Space on Main Street, including workshops and childcare programs. The nonprofit also operates an art gallery at The Aurora building across the street.

“We’re really investing in the residents who live here and trying to make their lives better,” Marotta said. “Look at this neighborhood and you’ll see the ridiculous amount of talent we need to celebrate.”

UMass Memorial’s Investment Committee first became aware of Creative Hub’s work through a Leadership Worcester connection. Marotta completed the 10-week, Chamber-led program, which explores different themes relevant to the Worcester community through hands-on leadership experiences, in 2018. The following year, she gave a tour of the former Boys Club to the Leadership Worcester Class, which included Kathryn Behan, director of clinical affiliations at UMass Memorial.

Impressed by Creative Hub’s work and vision, Behan – who chairs the Investment Committee – brought the project to her organization. After spending months putting together an in-depth application, Creative Hub was awarded a seven-year, \$500,000 investment loan.

“The Leadership Worcester connection was awesome. The investment probably would not have happened without that,” Marotta said.

Brown said the Creative Hub Community Arts Center will provide a pivotal connection between downtown and the Main South neighborhood, and will provide jobs and



Co-founders Laura Marotta and Stacy Lord have brought this space to life.

empowering programming for residents. As part of the partnership, Creative Hub will also host programming with UMass Memorial.

“They will bring patients to our space or we will go to their space and teach classes,” Marotta said. “They could also have their mobile medical van pull up and offer their services to the people in this neighborhood – it’s endless possibilities.”

Creative Hub, along with the Arts and Business Council, has already

secured \$4.5 million in tax credits, \$1.1 million in financing, and over \$1 million in fundraising for the former Boys Club renovation. The organization hopes to raise another \$400,000 from businesses and others in the community through donations and naming opportunities.

The Guild of St. Agnes, which will rent space in the building to provide subsidized child care for 88 toddlers and preschoolers, is also bringing nearly \$3 million to the project.

Chamber Golf Tourney Benefits College Students

Despite restrictions implemented because of the coronavirus emergency, the Chamber’s popular, annual golf tournament, the William J. Short Memorial Classic, was held on June 22 at Charter Oak Country Club in Hudson, MA. With strict social distancing guidelines in place, the tournament attracted business leaders for a friendly but competitive game of golf.

The tourney is named after the Chamber’s former president who served in the role for 25 years. A portion of the funds are given as college scholarships in Mr. Short’s name for Worcester area high school senior students who are studying at the college level.

MEET THE 2020 SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS



Selvana Abdelmesih

1. What high school did you graduate from?
Nipmuc Regional High School
2. What school will you be attending?
University of Massachusetts Amherst
3. What will you be majoring in?
Finance at Isenberg with a double major in political science and a minor in Arabic.
4. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
In 10 years I hope to have graduated law school and passed the bar and working at a law firm or organization that impacts the underprivileged.
5. What is something you have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic?
I have truly learned the value of family and relationships because the pandemic reminded me that all of the things we deem essential such as school or a job could be taken away at any second. However, family, friends and God will always be there.



Devin Kelly

1. What high school did you graduate from?
Grafton High School
2. What school will you be attending?
University of Massachusetts Amherst
3. What will you be majoring in?
Political science with plans to double major
4. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
I hope to be pursuing my curiosity. I have an interest in public policy, screenwriting, and journalism so we’ll have to wait and see.
5. What is something you have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic?
I’ve learned to give more credit to my body and mind. Sometimes we beat ourselves up over unrealistic expectations of how we will handle COVID-19 or what we will accomplish with our extra free time. I’ve decided to give myself some grace, I think that’s applicable pandemic or not.



Creative Hub utilizes space that makes the former Boys Club once again a welcoming community center for those inspired by art and creativity.



Dear Members of the Community:

It seems that on a daily basis, we’re seeing more and more evidence of the racial tensions in our country on the news. While the daily news may be discouraging, I find it also motivating to take action when it comes to finding solutions to racial disparities, particularly for those of us who work in the health care industry. As the President and CEO of the largest employer and largest health system in Central Massachusetts, this ongoing conversation about addressing racial disparities is important to me and to the 14,000 caregivers at UMass Memorial Health Care. I’m proud of the work we’re doing in this area, but we still have a long way to go. Here are a few things that we’re doing to address this regional and national problem.

COVID-19 Education and Prevention: The COVID-19 crisis has underscored the existence of health care disparities with the disease disproportionately affecting Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American and low-income communities nationwide and in our own service area. When testing data revealed this disparity, the UMass Memorial Health Care Community Benefit and Care Mobile teams took immediate action by creating a COVID-19 education program and taking it to the underserved neighborhoods in our region. Since April, this small but mighty team has distributed more than 15,000 education “kits” that includes prevention information in six different languages, along with free masks and hand sanitizer – all with the goal of preventing the spread of this disease in at-risk areas.

Community Testing: UMass Memorial Health Care has launched a comprehensive COVID-19 testing program that includes processing 5,000 tests per day at our hospital and outpatient locations. In addition, we’ve participated in Governor Baker’s “Stop the Spread” testing campaign, but with a focus on extending our testing to underserved populations. This resulted in a series of one-day “pop-up” testing sites in Worcester neighborhoods-in-need to reach more people and in a long-standing testing site at UMass Memorial-Marlborough Hospital. By far, we’re conducting more community testing than any other health care organization in the state.

UMass Memorial Health Equity Taskforce: In light of the disparity we were seeing with the COVID-19 crisis, we made the decision to stand up a Health Equity Taskforce to focus on better understanding and addressing the root causes and impact of these disparities, and developing a short-term and long-term health equity strategy for UMass Memorial.

- Among the issues the taskforce is addressing are:**
- developing improved data collection, reporting and analysis to better identify and understand existing health disparities;
 - addressing access barriers and disparities in the delivery and experience of care within UMass Memorial;
 - coordinating with and supporting the work of the City of Worcester Equity Task Force; and
 - working with our communities to lay the groundwork for a long-term health equity strategy for UMass Memorial.

First-Ever Health Equity Open Forum

We hosted our first-ever, community Health Equity Open Forum as a Facebook Live event on Thursday, October 29. I was joined by a distinguished panel of community members and elected officials to talk about racial disparities and injustice in health care, in our region and beyond. These panelists included:

- Congressman Jim McGovern, who represents our region in the 2nd Congressional District of Massachusetts
- Matilde “Mattie” Castiel, MD, Commissioner of Health and Human Services, City of Worcester
- Sarai Rivera, Worcester City Councilor and Chair of the Standing Committee on Public Health
- Tayyaba Salman, MD, Hospitalist, UMass Memorial HealthAlliance-Clinton Hospital, member of the Minority Advisory Council

Attorney Gina Plata Niño, Central-West Justice Center, was a magnificent moderator and led us through an engaging dialogue about how we can all work together to address systemic racism in our communities. If you missed it, you can log on to the UMass Memorial Health Care Facebook page to view the video.

Taking Action to Address Systemic Racism

We can’t stand silent while racism and racial disparities in our country and in our communities persist. Meaningful action can only come from confronting the problem. I’m encouraged by the national dialogue and the meaningful action steps we are taking in our region.

Mahatma Gandhi said: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” While ending racism seems like an impossible dream, just think of what we can accomplish by taking actions – big or small – that we develop together. For our community here in Central Massachusetts, I’m confident that we can be that change we want to see in our part of the world.

Stay safe and well,

Eric W. Dickson, MD, MHCM, FACEP
President and CEO, UMass Memorial Health Care



A Year in the Rear View Mirror: A SMALL BUT MIGHTY TEAM STEPS UP TO THE CHALLENGE

By Sharyn T. Williams, VP of Marketing, Communications, Programs, and Events, Worcester Regional Chamber

More than ever this year, many of us are taking the time to reflect on the days, weeks, and months that will make 2020 go down as one of the most unsettling we will ever experience. Watching and listening to our members, co-workers, and families was much the same for the Chamber staff as for those of you reading this right now. We worried about the same things, pivoted our work patterns, adjusted to the new norm and are now preparing for more of the same in the new year. As we close out 2020, we hope that you were able to join us for our virtual events. And there were many: The Breakfast Club, Business After Hours, Game Changers, more than 25 seminars, Connect for Success, and many others. For the foreseeable future, we expect to operate in our new normal and we promise to continue to innovate to bring you quality programming that will help you grow and operate your businesses and organizations. The Chamber team is passionate about our work and it’s been hard to watch our

members suffer from the personal and professional fallout associated with the pandemic. Please let us know what we can do to help you. Early in the coronavirus crisis, and to stay viable, the Chamber cut three positions reducing staff by 25 percent with the remaining team picking up additional duties. Recently, additional staff changes were made to continue to maximize our resources and grow our membership. The Chamber welcomed Tamara Berry to the team as assistant to the president and CEO, Tim Murray. Tamara is charged with managing Tim Murray’s schedule to streamline his calendar, schedule meetings, and facilitate his communications. Prior to her position at the Chamber, Tamara worked at Coghlin Electrical Contractors as the assistant to the president, Sue Mailman who is a former chair of the Chamber’s board of directors. Virginia K. Murphy (Parent) has been with the Chamber for 6 years beginning as Assistant to the president and CEO. Now joining Kristen Luna in a

sales role, Virginia will work to recruit new members to the organization and provide on-boarding and servicing to these businesses. She acts as the liaison to our affiliate Chamber partners, schedules the Chamber’s radio and TV shows, and hosts the 360 Pivot Facebook live events. Readers can find the contact information for staff on the Chamber’s website: www.WorcesterChamber.org by selecting “about” on the menu bar and then navigating to “staff directory.”



Tamara Berry



Virginia K. Murphy

AFFILIATE

CORNER

REGIONAL CHAMBER PARTNERS
WORKING TO ADVANCE
CENTRAL MASS

AUBURN | BLACKSTONE VALLEY | CENTRAL MASS SOUTH | WACHUSETT AREA | WEBSTER DUDLEY OXFORD

Auburn Chamber’s Scarecrow Contest Entertains, Tree Provides Holiday Cheer

By Virginia K. Murphy

During the summer and fall months the Auburn Chamber, its board and committees, wanted to keep the business community active, relevant and involved with the community and bring some smiles to the faces of Auburn residents during this pandemic.

For the month of October, a “Scarecrow Your Business” contest was held with 17 local businesses participating and McCoy’s Action Karate crowned the winner. The creative Auburn companies used the time to highlight their businesses and the time spent together was helpful for staff development. Located in Goddard Park, the scene was visited by families and friends with enthusiasm.

The Auburn Chamber also donated a Christmas tree, a Frasier fir, which was planted in Goddard Park at Drury Square and will be adorned with decorations donated by the Auburn Chamber. The previous tree was lost due to disease.



Photo by Jeff LaBonte

FROM GRANT, PAGE 1

At the event, Mr. Blais attributed the WBDC’s decision to contribute in such a large way to help sustain the efforts of the Chamber who helped launch them 55 years ago. A recording of the event can be viewed from a link on the homepage of the Chamber’s website: worcesterchamber.org In addition to these large grants, several businesses and individuals made donations totaling \$5,955. (A donor list can be viewed in the box below).

The Chamber’s vice president of membership development and finance noted that it’s been a tricky time to manage the organization’s finances. Layoffs and other cutbacks have helped but the Chamber is ineligible for any of the government-funded loans or grants and relies primarily on its membership to sustain operations.

According to Ms. Salem-Pervier, “Membership dues, sponsorship dollars, and program fees are the bulk of the Chamber’s sources of revenue.

These grant donations will help us end the year in the black.”

The Chamber had continued to support the local business community throughout the pandemic while experiencing its own loss of funding from the cancellation of events and revenue-generating programs along with fewer new members joining and attrition due to business hardships and closures. The organization’s staff has stepped up to take on additional duties left by laid off workers and has added additional support services during this economic downturn including outreach to every member.

“We are grateful to bankHometown for recognizing the work the Chamber has done to support local businesses, especially during this pandemic,” Mr. Murray said. “We appreciate this generous donation to help us continue to provide those services to the business community.”

Organizations wishing to contribute may still do so by sending donations to the Chamber at 311 Main St., Suite 200, Worcester, MA 01608.

Challenge Grant Donors

MAJOR DONORS

bankHometown.....\$25,000
WBDC.....\$25,000

CORPORATE CONTRIBUTORS

Guru Tax & Financial Services – Satya Mitra
Saint-Gobain Abrasives
SCORE

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

Robert D. Cox (Bowditch & Dewey)
Tim Murray (Chamber)
Robert J. Morton (bankHometown)
Chizoma Nosike (Acclaim Home Healthcare)
Janice Weekes (MassHire)

The Chamber staff and board of directors wish to extend a sincere thank you to those who donated to the Chamber’s Challenge Grant which, to date, totals \$55,955.

Sheila Dooley (Pernet Family Health Service)
Lisa Mancini (Notre Dame Academy)
Jessica McGarry (Country Bank)
Diane Giampa (Bay State Savings Bank)
Eurayshia Williams-Reed (Shi Shi’s Lounge)

Why do I need a Buy-Sell Agreement?

By William R. Mahoney, VP, Rockland Trust

If you’re a business owner you’re busy. You likely have a list of both personal and professional items that are what author Steven Covey calls “important, but not urgent”. Now might be a good time to tackle the important “what if” questions. If I am no longer here or become sick and unable to run this business what’s next for my family, my employees, and my leadership team?

A buy-sell agreement is a legal contract that clearly outlines a transfer of business ownership interest to the owner’s successors upon exiting the business. It protects the company and future owners by clearly stating the existing owner’s wishes for how he/she wants it to be handled. Buy-sell agreements are generally funded with life insurance.

FIVE BENEFITS OF A FUNDED BUY-SELL AGREEMENT

1. Provides liquidity for the payment of estate taxes and the money to redeem shares
2. Keeps the lights on and provides for the continuation of the business
3. Guarantees a buyer
4. Avoids conflicts or uncertainty among surviving owners, heirs and employees
5. Establishes the value of the business for estate tax purposes, if structured properly

#1 Generally, federal estate taxes are due within nine months of death or sooner in some states. If you have to sell today, you have to sell at today’s price.

Set yourself on the right path by brainstorming what you believe your share of the business is worth today as well as transfer costs.

#2 Several types of business organizations end at the death of the owner. It can wind up and liquidate or the surviving business partners may continue the business as a new partnership.

Think about the key members of your team, record your intentions, and communicate them to create transparency in your vision for the future.

#3 If you die with a buy-sell agreement funded and in place, your estate doesn’t have to search for a buyer. The buyer is known and the sale of shares can occur quickly and smoothly. Employees and vendors remain protected.

Consider asking yourself and preparing for the unexpected: if you had to move your business tomorrow and could only bring one employee with you, who would it be? Is it the same person who you see running the business in the future? What if that future started tomorrow, is it the same person?

#4 At your death, there may be a conflict of interest among your surviving co-owners or heirs. With no pre-arranged plan a dispute is likely to occur. A buy-sell agreement in place helps avoid this.

Write down what you’d like to see happen. Best-selling author Jodi Picoult warns of perfectionism: “You can edit a bad page, but you can’t edit a blank page.” Get started now.

#5 Under the right circumstances, the buy-sell agreement may set the fair market value of an interest in the business when the agreement is executed. Buy-sell agreements between family members can arouse additional scrutiny by the IRS, but when drafted by an experienced attorney they can weather the scrutiny.

Talk to your CPA about how they would value your business. Consider what you would pay if your competitor offered to sell you their business?

GATHER A TEAM

You’ve built your business with the help of trusted advisors and team members. Bring them all into the fold as you construct your plan. Involve your CPA, estate planning attorney, financial advisor, and insurance specialist. However, it is equally important that you also involve the stakeholders in your business. Doing so will help take the first steps toward developing a succession and exit plan.

Although there are many technical considerations as to the type of buy-sell agreement you’ll ultimately draft, don’t let the complexity keep you from the task. Plans can and should be periodically reviewed and updated as laws and circumstances change, but you owe it to yourself, your family, and your team to start now.

RT Investment Services and LPL Financial do not provide legal advice or services. Please consult your legal advisor regarding your specific situation.

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FROM OUTLOOK, PAGE 1

hard to come by. Marking just how difficult the times really are, in a late-October interview, Mr. Erickson said, “This week I have zero jobs. Normally this time of year, when there are a lot of office meetings getting quarterly things ready, I’d probably have between 12 and 20 jobs, depending on what’s going on,” in addition to the local college football games every Saturday. Likewise, while TEE’s typically books 20 to 30 large barbecue events a year, they’ve only done two so far in 2020.

For the time being, he’s surviving off smaller jobs like boxed lunches and catered dinners for four. “I do anything just to stay alive,” said Mr. Erickson, who even laid himself off in order to bring back his chef.

“Because I don’t have a storefront and people can’t come in the [National Grid] building, I’ve been doing free deliveries [...] I’m using Facebook a lot, and my daughters are getting me into Instagram to help me market a little better.” He’s also been cutting his prices – despite rising product costs – just to stay competitive.

Switching up weekly specials like kabobs, chicken piccata, and breakfast pizza, Mr. Erickson says he tries to stay positive and think outside the box, but “it’s just sad. Seeing all these mom-and-pops go down – watching them for these six, seven, eight months and now knowing I might be one of them – it’s tough.”

HOSPITALITY AND ENTERTAINMENT

If any industry is suffering as much as or more than the food and restaurant industry, it’s hospitality and entertainment. As more Americans forego leisurely activities and recreational travel, companies like hotels, event venues, movie theaters, and arcades are struggling to attract business.

The Beechwood Hotel is certainly feeling the strain. After temporarily closing at the end of March in the interest of their employees’ and guests’ safety, the Plantation Street hotel opened again on June 8 with new health protocols in place. Masks are required, temperatures are taken, social distance markers are used on the floors, hand sanitizer is readily available throughout, and common areas like the lobby are cleaned every hour on the hour. When it comes to the guest rooms, there’s no more room service or takeout, no coffee station, as well as a complete disinfecting process plus a full 24 hours of vacancy between guest stays.

Yet, even with all these precautions in place, they aren’t seeing occupancy reach pre-pandemic levels. According to Sayed Saleh, managing director at the Beechwood, the hotel is seeing almost half the number of people they saw before the coronavirus outbreak, and is employing roughly 30 of their original staff of 90.

Mr. Saleh says the restrictions on event sizes is partly to blame for their downtick in business. Though many weddings, seminars, and conferences were being postponed or canceled, when Massachusetts was limiting indoor gatherings to 25 people, the Beechwood was seeing some revenue from “micro-weddings:” smaller receptions of 18 or 20 people.

While times are dark now, Mr. Saleh believes he can see the light at the end of the tunnel. “Definitely we have been impacted [by the virus], but we are encouraged by the signs we’re seeing lately. We’re encouraged by the pickup – it’s small, but nevertheless, it’s a pickup in the rooms and small functions booked.” His confidence stems from the “vibrant community” the Beechwood finds

themselves situated in. “We have faith in Worcester and what Worcester has to offer, and we have faith that, in the long run, we will see change.”

It’s a similar feeling at downtown Worcester’s Hilton Garden Inn. They, too, are being thorough with cleaning efforts. Their “CleanStay” program is a commitment to consistent sanitization of high-touch areas and other safety measures like contactless check-in, virtual room keys, protective plastic wrap on TV remotes, and door seals which indicate when a guest room has been cleaned.

Plus, bipolar ionization system technology has been installed in the HVAC systems to ward off airborne spread of COVID-19. Director of Sales and Marketing at the Hilton’s Worcester location, Emily Mulhane, says this AtmosAir system, proven to neutralize coronavirus air particulates by 99.92%, was a “significant investment” by the property’s owner to keep guests and employees safe. “We want people to travel. We want them to feel safe traveling. We want them to know we’re doing everything possible to go the extra mile and make sure they have that peace of mind,” she said.

Still, like others in the industry, downtown Worcester’s largest hotel isn’t immune to the repercussions of the virus, experiencing sizable layoffs and not yet seeing a return to their pre-pandemic occupancy levels. As the host hotel for a majority of conventions in the area, Ms. Mulhane chalks up a large chunk of their losses to the DCU Center remaining closed and the state’s caps on gatherings.

The DCU Center “is a huge revenue stream for us,” she said. “For a typical convention, you’re looking at anywhere from a 50 to a 100 room nights. So, it’s a significant loss to have the DCU Center closed, but obviously, even if they were open, they really couldn’t host that number of people,” because of crowd restrictions.

In an attempt to offset the revenue loss, Hilton Garden Inns across the country are offering creative promotions and programs designed to get more people through their doors, like their essential traveler discount and “WorkSpaces by Hilton.” This new program promises a “home office away from home,” allowing those working remotely to rent a guest room by day at a discounted rate. Each room has complimentary WiFi, a work desk, a mini fridge, a microwave, and a Keurig. Ms Mulhane says, “A lot of times, it’s not always easy to work from home, especially when you have kids. So if you have a project to do or need a private space for a conference call, you can rent one of our rooms.”

Much like the Beechwood Hotel, Ms. Mulhane says 2021 is already looking a little better for the Hilton Garden Inn, as many of the functions and room blocks they had scheduled did in fact postpone into the next year rather than canceling outright. “Fingers crossed everything kind of continues to improve and the governor decides to lift some restrictions when it comes to meetings and venues,” she said.

On the entertainment and amusement side of things, not all businesses were necessarily facing shutdowns or shortcomings; those like FreePlay Arcade in Worcester hadn’t even gotten the chance to open yet when the coronavirus started impacting the Central Mass. region.

Sights set on a late-March debut of their Union Street location, co-owner Anthony Santurri said that didn’t go as planned since it was around the time when everything started to close, and they weren’t able to get final inspections done because in-person visits

were halted. Eight months later, the Dave-and-Buster’s-like restaurant and bar arcade has still not opened due to certain state restrictions in place for attractions of this kind.

Mr. Santurri and his business partners already own and operate the original FreePlay location in Providence, RI. Both properties have a restaurant license but Mr. Santurri says it’s the difference between the two states’ rules at the moment which have enabled him to reopen the Providence location while the Worcester one stays closed. In Rhode Island, businesses like FreePlay are essentially being treated as a casino. Masks are still required on the game floor, but patrons are able to take their drink with them as they move around to play and can “sip it discreetly” under their masks, Mr. Santurri explained. Whereas, in Massachusetts, customers must eat and drink only in the dining room, and cannot take a beverage with them to the games. Under this “restrictive measure,” he says FreePlay Worcester would have to remove virtually half their arcade games in order to service everyone sitting in the dining area, which isn’t possible at this point.

Although staying closed has been “a financial burden, monumentally,” as Mr. Santurri says, he and his partners find themselves in a catch-22, where opening their doors would be even more burdensome. “It’s extremely costly, but I will lose money if I open under the present restrictions. Every week I would go in the hole,” he said, adding that, since they’re a new business with no established history, they haven’t been able to get any PPP loans or grants, making things all the more difficult.

For now, they’ve decided to hold off until 2021. They’re eying January or February as a potential opening time frame waiting for the holidays to pass and hopefully for local coronavirus data to move in the right direction. However, the biggest challenge remains the unpredictability and uncertainty of it all – not just the virus.

Mr. Santurri says elected leaders seem to waver frequently on their decided course of action, and since he can’t anticipate what’s coming, there’s no continuity on which to base a business plan. “I have no idea what they’ll do day-to-day or week-to-week, so no business owner in the hospitality industry can plan,” he said. “We could all be on a curfew next week at nine o’clock; we could be closed again – we don’t know.” (EDITOR’S NOTE: The interview and writing of this article took place prior to the imposed curfew.)

The one guarantee? FreePlay will open. Mr. Santurri says he and his partners remain “100%” committed to Worcester. Upon choosing the Heart of the Commonwealth as the spot for their second location years ago, they envisioned the restaurant and bar arcade “would be another piece of the puzzle creating a ‘destination Worcester,’” Mr. Santurri says, and they still believe it will be. He says people who have been eagerly awaiting FreePlay’s new location can rest assured that they will open one day and, “hopefully it will be a place they can have some joy in their lives and, for a few hours, forget about all the unhappiness that’s happened.”

RETAIL AND SERVICE

As FreePlay waits to open, others are getting down to business even in the midst of a pandemic. On Halloween, Bud’s Goods and Provisions opened the first of what’s expected to be a string of stores in Massachusetts on Worcester’s West Boylston Street. After suffering an almost 90-day delay from their initial target date of Aug. 1, the recreational marijuana dispensary

is now open and aiming to “raise the bar for cannabis retail.”

Asked about what the experience has been like launching a business at a time when so many others are shuttering, CEO Alex Mazin said they at least had the luxury of building all these COVID-related protocols and changes into their roll-out plan prior to their late-October grand opening, rather than having to adjust on the fly while in operation.

Despite the destruction and terrible things to come as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Mazin says he tries to look at the positives, and when it came to opening Bud’s, there were some silver linings.

First, with millions of Americans unfortunately unemployed, he says there are more and better candidates available in the current talent pool. In his eyes, those who lost jobs in the restaurant, hospitality, or other service-based industries are “perfectly complemented to work in the cannabis industry, specifically at the retail level,” which is good news for people like him who are hiring.

Second, Mr. Mazin says the cannabis industry is no stranger to strict measures, but due to the coronavirus, some of those restrictions were altered in order for business operations to continue safely, like the allowance of curbside pickup – something which was previously not afforded to dispensaries. “At the end of the day, we’re a highly-regulated business, and COVID-19 actually loosened some of those regulations for us to leverage,” he said, pointing out they can now accept phone and online orders as well.

In response, Bud’s Goods has rethought the retail experience even more. They’ve installed a WiFi connection which extends into the parking lot and allows their tablets to process sales from the customer’s car. They also implemented QR codes at product displays throughout the store to provide consumers the ability to scan to read more about the item or brand.

For the Worcester-raised head of the company, these unique features are all part of elevating the experience as best they can, especially in his hometown. “That’s where the extra pride comes in and that extra level of detail,” said Mr. Mazin. “My goal is not to just build a dispensary, it’s to change what a dispensary should be and set the new standard.”

Bud’s Goods and Provisions isn’t the only business to open up shop in Worcester amid this pandemic chaos. Husband-and-wife team Jim and Debbie Coyle opened a Great Clips location in late-July and say so far, under the circumstances, “things are going about as well as can be expected.”

In accordance with state restrictions and CDC guidelines, the hair salon has a number of COVID-19 safety measures in place; people wait in the parking lot rather than the waiting room, everyone wears masks, stylists wear eyewear and change both their smock and gloves between each customer, every client gets a new cape, hand sanitizer is provided, and absolutely everything – from the floor to the tools – is sanitized.

On top of advertising these diligent safety protocols, Mr. Coyle says he recently signed a contract to put coupons for a haircut on the back of Price Chopper receipts, since two of the grocery chain’s stores are within a couple-mile radius of his salon. “We’re doing everything we can think of to drive people into the doors. But it’s hard because people are scared; they don’t wanna come out,” he said. They’ve also expanded their hours

Worcester Regional Food Hub Can Now Accept SNAP

Allows Lower-Income Residents Access to Higher Quality Food

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent

As millions of Americans struggle with food insecurity, an issue which has only been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Worcester Regional Food Hub (WRFH) is making sure more lower-income Central Massachusetts residents have access to high quality, local food.

The WRFH has been granted the ability to now accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, formerly known as food stamps.

The largest federal nutrition assistance program in the country, SNAP provides benefits to eligible low-income individuals and families through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card which acts like a debit card and can be used to purchase certain foods at authorized retail stores. After applying back in May, the WRFH was accepted in September to be one of those authorized locations.

A partner of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and supported by the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, the WRFH aims to increase local food access and consumption, support local food entrepreneurs, and collectively build healthy communities.

In line with that mission, Food Hub Director Shon Rainford says this new ability to accept SNAP only furthers their efforts to promote healthy eating by providing people of all incomes access to fresh products.

“By being able to accept SNAP we can directly reach the population of Worcester who really can use this healthy, local, nutritious food and use their SNAP benefits in order to obtain it,” said Mr. Rainford.

Residents receiving SNAP benefits can now use their government-funded EBT cards to purchase these local products at the WRFH’s weekly food box pickup on Wednesdays, or at their new Saturday

food market which takes place once every month.

Mr. Rainford says the weekly curbside pickup option has really “taken off” since its inception in March as a contactless way to buy fresh products without having to confront the pandemic crowds at the grocery store. Due to the program’s popularity and high demand, he says it will continue, “and this [SNAP acceptance] will allow a whole other market segment to take advantage of the local food we’re bringing to Worcester.”

The ability to accept SNAP benefits isn’t just a positive thing for needy families in the community. It’s also good news for the local farms and food producers who work with the Food Hub. Simply put, with more residents able to purchase the products they sell through the WRFH, these Central Massachusetts food makers have the potential to sell more, thereby increasing their revenue.

With more farms in Worcester County than any other county in the state, the Chamber’s director of government affairs and public policy Alex Guardiola recognizes the caliber of this economic value. “As the fiscal sponsor* of the Worcester Regional Food Hub, we really feel this is part of their bigger mission in allowing for access to quality food,” he says, “but it also has other, trickle-down effects for our small businesses which really got hit hard by the pandemic,” adding that it helps those food providers better sell their inventory before it goes to waste, all while keeping the dollars spent on food needs in the local economy.

Calling it “an ideal economic development tool,” Mr. Rainford says having this system in place is “the best of all worlds as far as being able to support our local farmers and food producers while getting that food to populations that need a hand up right now.”

It goes without saying that need has only been intensified by the coronavirus pandemic which has left millions unemployed in the U.S., and many food insecure. According to the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, at the time of writing, more than 59,900 residents in Worcester County alone are currently receiving SNAP benefits.

Moreover, Worcester Public Schools students can also now access food from the WRFH via the Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) cards they’re receiving, issued to supplement the food needs of children who may typically rely on physically being in school to get lunches and other meals. This gives students and families the opportunity to utilize those funds on local, healthier foods made available by the WRFH, as opposed to other processed products.

While the Food Hub has already consistently been working for food justice for all and economic development for regional agriculture, this opportunity to accept SNAP only doubles down on those endeavors. At the end of the day, Mr. Guardiola says, “There’s always going to be a need for good, quality food and this is just another tool in the toolbox for us to get people access to it.”

**As of April 1, 2020, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce is the fiscal sponsor of the Worcester Regional Food Hub. The Worcester Area Business Education Foundation (WABEF), the 501(c)(3) foundation under the Chamber, provides management, financial, administrative, and human resources support to the WRFH. The Chamber ensures compliance of the relevant laws and regulations of the program, and exercises full legal and managerial control of the WRFH.*

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The Caribbean Press is Serving Up Comfort, Joy and a Taste of Home



By Jennifer Ingham, Correspondent

When speaking with The Caribbean Press food truck owner Jermaine Smith, it's obvious that his passion for food runs deep. Since 2019, he has been serving customers throughout Central Massachusetts and beyond, bringing Caribbean flavors to the forefront through a variety of sweet and savory dishes. Jamaican Jerk chicken paninis, traditional rice and beans and coconut and pineapple tarts, are just a few food mouth-watering menu options that keep a steady stream of new and returning customers visiting the order window.

Smith grew up in the Virgin Islands and for him, cooking was a communal experience in his younger years. He fondly remembers time spent with his mother, grandmother and great-grandmother tasting and observing their culinary creations. Through his ever-changing menu, Smith enjoys being able to provide a "taste of home" for those who have visited or lived in the Caribbean, along with those who may be trying Caribbean food for the first time.

Smith cooks with authentic Caribbean spices, sauces, and ingredients to recreate the recipes he grew up enjoying, a majority that are sourced regionally. When asked about his ingredients, Smith is more than happy to share details about what makes his food unique.

"Each of our dishes offer something different. For example, we use Caribbean curry that's full of flavor, tropical barbecue and Jerk sauce, and my rice and beans are done Dominican-style, with my own twist," said Smith.

Smith wanted to operate a food truck from the start, versus a brick and mortar location. The flexibility in showing up and serving people wherever

there was demand, appealed to him, along with the opportunity to change the menu as often as he wanted in response to what customers are ordering as their top favorites. Smith is clear that he has remained customer-focused ever since he first put his food truck wheels in motion.

"One of my favorite things about having the food

and napkins, to ensure the health of the customers. Satisfaction and enjoyment remains at the center of their service.

That said, business has remained steady with their continued presence at the Worcester Food Hub Farmer's Market and recent pivot to serving take-away options to customers visiting local breweries which started in early summer 2020.

In reflecting on how their business has evolved since their 2019 launch, Smith speaks highly of others in the food truck community and particularly the Food Hub's director, Shon Rainford, naming them as mentors who have supported his staff, helped find suppliers, assisted with permits and more.

"Shon has helped with things like exploring membership with the Chamber of Commerce and securing additional storage space at The Food Hub," says Smith. "Being a part of the larger Hub and food truck community has been great. We all get together and talk about business and how we can help each other out. I've felt welcome from the beginning."

Clearly, Smith puts so much care and appreciation into the preparation, cooking, serving, and operating of The Caribbean Press. With each dish, he is able to share more of his culture and history, connecting the community as a whole, one conversation at a time.

"My food is comfort food. When people are happy and enjoy what I serve that, that makes me very proud."

To locate The Caribbean Press' next food truck stop or to see current menu options, visit www.thecaribbeanpress.com.



Pictured in front of his brightly colored food truck, Jermaine Smith serves up Jamaican specialties and shares the taste of the Caribbean islands with Central Mass food enthusiasts.

truck is the interacting I have with customers. I've met so many people and I enjoy those conversations," said Smith. "Over the summer, I had a family from St. Thomas, where I'm from, visit. We get a lot of people from the Islands."

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has required some adjustments to typical operations. Both Smith and his sole co-worker on the truck took a mandatory food and sanitation safety course to remain open. They have also started using pre-wrapped utensils



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Manufacturing Leaders Discuss Changes, Challenges During Pandemic

WHETHER IT'S A LOCAL OR A GLOBAL MARKET, ADAPTING IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent

Each year, the first Friday in October is recognized as Manufacturing Day – an opportunity for manufacturers to highlight their work and inspire a pipeline of future workers.

This year, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce marked the occasion by hosting a Manufacturing Roundtable where two industry leaders shared how their respective companies have confronted challenges and made changes amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Like so many others in the country and the world, nearby importer-exporter Euro-American World-wide Logistics and manufacturer FLEXcon North America were forced to adapt quickly at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, pivoting their operations and adjusting their business models.

For Euro-American, a family-owned business located at the Worcester Regional Airport and a third-party logistics provider for the life sciences industry both domestically and abroad, one of the most significant hurdles they've faced is international travel bans. As a company which ships a lot of pharmaceuticals into the U.S. that are manufactured overseas, "It's been very chaotic," says President Eric Busenburg.

A majority of what's being imported into the U.S. goes in the belly of the aircraft, meaning when passengers are flying internationally, whatever space is left over after luggage is accounted for is where cargo goes. But beginning in March, travel bans caused fewer people to fly. According to Mr. Busenburg, 95 percent of aircrafts were grounded which led to a 500 percent increase in prices for shipping. "If airlines can't make money, they can't fly planes," he says, adding that sea freight faced similar troubles, with 45 percent of sailings canceled and a 75 percent increase in prices.

While the company's outlook on the economy is grim, Mr. Busenburg says there have been some

bright spots in all of this: "We're forced to innovate. It's a good thing." Airlines turned to re-purposing passenger aircrafts, removing the seats in order to carry all cargo. Ocean freight has started offering more refrigerated shipping containers to meet the demands for shipping certain products. And as a result, they were able to absorb a lot of the business from the pharma and food industries whose products have a non-negotiable shelf life and had to get to market.

Mr. Busenburg says the economy was already on a downward trend prior to the pandemic, which only made it worse. Euro-American anticipates that decline to continue and is planning accordingly.

Meanwhile, FLEXcon North America started the year with high hopes, and while 2020 has certainly shaped up to be a year to remember, CEO Lavon Winkler says it's not in the way he'd imagined.

A company which specializes in making pressure-sensitive adhesives, FLEXcon has 14 locations worldwide, nine manufacturing sites, and around 1,000 employees – with FLEXcon North America headquartered in Spencer being the largest.

Making materials used for labeling of food, beverage, personal hygiene, medical, and pharmaceutical products put them in the "essential business" category when coronavirus-related closures were announced. "If our products aren't available – the right products at the right time – it interrupts supply chains and keeps those products from getting in the hands of the consumers and people who need it."

Mr. Winkler says in order to keep the business operating, and not create that disruption in the supply chain, they needed to ensure they were keeping their employees safe by developing processes and protocols which managed the risk of COVID-19 in their facilities.

With revenues down around nine percent, Mr. Winkler says the year hasn't been as "financially fruitful

as anticipated," but there are some bright spots.

When asked by local health care workers to make personal protective equipment on two separate occasions amid the virus's initial peak, the team at FLEXcon was able to design and prototype face shields and tent hoods within about 48 hours, using materials they already had in-house. They went on to donate 20,000 face shields to area hospitals, health care facilities, and first responders; the other 100,000 were sold at cost.

Aside from those two new product offerings, Mr. Winkler says their prime label business (materials they make for labeling products such as shampoo) is up, while their more durable product identification business is down, throwing things off a little.

Though they project this declining economic trend will continue through fiscal year 2021, FLEXcon is "making some changes to counteract this prediction," Mr. Winkler says. Over the last few years, the company has been positioning itself for the future by emphasizing process and people development. "We believe at FLEXcon that the people are the company [...] so we invest heavily in the development and training of our folks." This investment in their employees is also reflected by their no layoffs practice, which has helped keep around 500 people in the region employed at a time when millions of Americans have lost their jobs.

ABOUT THE ROUNDTABLE

Held quarterly and sponsored by both Saint-Gobain and the MassHire Central Region Workforce Board, the Chamber's Manufacturing Roundtable provides industry members the opportunity to share issues they face in their business, discuss best practices, seek support from others, and learn about programs and benefits available to assist them. For more information or to get involved, please contact Alex Guardiola, the Chamber's director of government affairs and public policy, at aguardiola@worcesterchamber.org.

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FROM OUTLOOK, PAGE 9

of operation. "I'm trying to make it as convenient for the customers as possible. If they want to go early, they can; if they want to go late, they can. We're open seven days a week."

Mr. Coyle, who's been in the C-suite for more than 20 years, says he understands "cash is king," and knows he'll have to spend money to make money as he continues to build his customer base. But right now, he says they're losing money, and if they have to close their doors, they'll "probably still lose money on just rent and nothing else. So we'll ride it out."

In the interest of the five full-time and three part-time stylists they employ, Mr. Coyle doesn't want to close but says he'll always do whatever is the right thing for his staff. He's hoping business picks up soon and that the promotions they offer – like those coupons and the free haircuts for vets on Veterans Day – will help build up a valued customer base.

Unlike Bud's Goods and Great Clips, which are both new to the city's business landscape, Joseph's Lock and Safe has been in Worcester since 1926 and is still going steady through the pandemic. When Massachusetts began shutting down in March, Joseph's Lock reduced their store showroom hours, but were still open and offering mobile service since they fell into the essential business category.

Owner Seth Derderian says that as some businesses went remote and others saw increasing in-person traffic, many of their customers required help securing or re-evaluating how their buildings were being opened and closed. With hours changing, companies down-sizing, and employees coming and going, the security

services of Joseph's Lock were in high demand. According to Mr. Derdarian, a lot of their customers from the manufacturing and medical industries were requesting automatic-closing and self-locking doors be installed due to higher volumes of order shipments and the need for more security at employee entrances which were normally wide open.

Those quick-fix jobs were needed immediately at the start of the pandemic, but Mr. Derderian says a lot of their longer-term projects were put on hold. "Jobs we've had purchase orders for were given a green light and it was like 'Hurry, hurry, hurry!' but then it was like, 'wait.'"

Overall, Mr. Derderian says Joseph's Lock and Safe hasn't been much busier than normal but has been steady, and the market for safes has been hot. "Safe sales are soaring. A lot of people wanted to have accessibility to their valuables and now want to have a little cash in their homes," he said, noting that banks being closed or only open for limited hours and services left people feeling uncertain and seeking more tangible security with their valuables at their fingertips.

HEALTH CARE

It goes without saying those in the health care industry have undoubtedly been busier these past months. Acclaim Home Health Care Inc. is no exception. With an average daily census of 200 patients – many of whom rely on the caregivers' services for things as basic as getting out of bed in the morning or having a first meal – closing down was not an option. Since the coronavirus is known to be particularly dangerous for the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions,

this made the work of Acclaim's almost 40 caregivers particularly challenging, as one of their main tasks was to keep the patients healthy and comfortable at home to avoid overwhelming hospitals.

Like many other health care facilities during the pandemic's spring peak, just acquiring enough personal protective equipment proved to be extremely difficult. On top of that, Acclaim Home Health Care's President Chizoma Nosike was encountering a staffing issue: a few of her employees had to quit at the onset because either they or their family members had conditions which put them at heightened risk for the virus. Others had to take leaves of absence when schools closed and they didn't have child care for their children.

In the meantime, hiring new people was a problem in and of itself because of the depleted workforce. "Getting CNAs or trained home health aides from the occupational training schools was not possible because the state shut them down and did not put them in the first phase of reopening," Ms. Nosike said. "Schools couldn't graduate their students because they still needed to go to a nursing home to do their clinicals – and the nursing homes had shut their doors to students."

Because the nursing and care services Acclaim Home Health Care provides are usually under insurance, another hurdle in all of the madness was navigating changes with physician's offices and proper documentation, and helping patients use telemedicine. In an effort to keep this at-risk population out of the rehab centers and hospitals, Ms. Nosike says the health aide agency staff was becoming the "eyes and ears" of the doctors, offering to be at the patient's house on the day and time of

scheduled calls to help them maneuver their devices and meet insurance requirements for a successful telemedicine visit.

MANUFACTURING

FLEXcon Company, a manufacturer employing around 500 people at their North American headquarters in Spencer, Mass., has faced some challenges in the era of COVID-19. As a company which produces materials for pressure-sensitive labels on all sorts of food, personal hygiene, medical, and pharmaceutical products, they too, were deemed an essential business and had to jump into immediate action to ensure they could keep running smoothly.

"If you can't put a label on a product, you have now interrupted that part of the supply chain," explained Lavon Winkler, president and CEO of FLEXcon North America. "So we've got to make sure that we're working with our suppliers, we're keeping our folks safe and well, and that we have the processes in place not just so we keep the business moving forward – but so we can manage any potential covid incident in such a way that we mitigate the impact it could have on our people."

On the business side of things, Mr. Winkler says FLEXcon isn't where they had hoped to be when 2020 started, with sales now down around 9% overall. Their mix of orders has changed, as certain products are in higher demand than others – like the materials they make which have been used for labels on millions of COVID-19 tests. According to Mr. Winkler, though FLEXcon's margins are slightly off-kilter and they aren't as profitable now as they were before, they are

SEE OUTLOOK, PAGE 20



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Chamber’s Business and Government Forum

Canadian Consul General and Director of U.S. Commercial Service Discuss Massachusetts–Canadian Trade Partnerships

By David Sullivan, Economic Development Fellow

In these uncertain times, the Canadian Consul General in Boston, David Alward, assured attendees of the Chamber’s Business and Government Forum that the United States still has someone it can count on.

“One thing that is clear is that the relationship between the U.S. and Canada is very deep, very secure,” Alward said.

On October 27, Alward and the director of the U.S. Commercial Service in Boston, Jim Paul, joined the Chamber for a discussion about how each of them works to promote cross-border business relationships between New England and Canada. The forum is sponsored by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts and Ventry Associates.

Alward has roots in both countries, being born in Beverly and then moving to New Brunswick, where he pursued a political career and eventually became premier of the Canadian province.

WORKING TO STREAMLINE TRADE FOR BUSINESSES

With the life sciences and technology sectors booming in Massachusetts, Alward’s work focuses on getting Canadian companies to share in the Commonwealth’s high-tech economy through exports and site selection. In



David Alward
Canadian Consul General

this respect, Alward touted his office’s strong relationship with the U.S. Commercial Service in Boston.

Alward explained the work that his office conducts out of Boston, touching on three fundamental responsibilities: consular services for Canadians in the area, economic and political advocacy through government and chambers such as the Worcester Regional Chamber, and business development for Canadian companies looking to grow their exports to the United States.

Jim Paul concurred that this relationship between their offices was crucial. “In Canada, we work with our colleagues day in, day out in Ottawa, Montreal, and Calgary,” Paul said, referring to the Commercial Service’s satellite offices in Canadian cities. Paul

expressed that the Chamber is also a useful liaison for outreach to Worcester on behalf of the Commercial Service.

Describing his office’s work as complementary to the consulate’s work, Paul discussed the ways in which they assist American businesses in exploring markets in Canada.

“One of our trade associates is always available to meet with a company,” Paul told the attendees. “Anything from the export process and logistics to marketing intelligence and business counseling.”

U.S. - CANADA - MEXICO AGREEMENT

The forum also featured discussion about the relatively new U.S.-Canada-Mexico Agreement, referred to as the USMCA, and how it affects international trade in North America.

On the USMCA, both speakers agreed that the trade agreement provides a more modern understanding of the relationship between Canada and the U.S.

According to Alward, the USMCA brings more positive changes in labor and environmental standards and gender equity when compared to the old agreement known as NAFTA. It also emphasizes the importance of e-commerce, cooperation in automobile manufacturing, and improved wages in Mexico.

Despite the upheavals in the U.S. resulting from the pandemic, it being an election year, and a national reckoning with racial justice, both speakers were not concerned about the U.S. and Canada’s relationship. They both noted that previous social and political changes have done little to harm the friendship between these two long-standing allies.

BY THE NUMBERS: TRADE BETWEEN THE REGIONS IS BIG BUSINESS

Canada is currently the largest international importer of American goods, and overall trade between our two countries totaled an estimated \$718 billion in 2019.

Worcester and Massachusetts also have deep ties to Canada, going all the way back to the tens of thousands of French and English-speaking Canadians who immigrated to Central Massachusetts in the 1800s.

Massachusetts itself exports \$2.9 billion in goods to Canada annually, mostly in scientific and medical equipment and machinery. The Commonwealth imports \$8.1 billion in Canadian goods, mostly in agriculture and energy. There are over 200 Canadian-owned companies operating in Massachusetts, employing more than 26,000 people across a wide range of industries.

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**General Manager,
Diana Gallego**

Perched Atop Grafton Hill, the 100 Wall Street Luxury Apartments Provide Top Notch Views and Living Space

By Virginia K. Murphy

Incubating businesses, helping to bring good-paying jobs to the region, transportation, and housing are some of the initiatives on which the Chamber is focused.

Last year, the Chamber invested in a housing study to more fully understand the needs of Central Mass. residents. This report helps businesses, investors, and municipalities to make decisions about the types, the number, and the amount of money they will invest in housing because it is local and relies on data.

The report, released at the Chamber's 2019 Game Changers Conference a little over a year ago, clearly indicated that there are unaddressed housing challenges in the region. Namely, there is a significant need for market rate, workforce, and lower income rental properties. Further, the study indicates that an investment of workforce housing construction should pay off in the long run.

The study also claims that if Worcester continues the current economic, housing and employment development projects, the area's working population could grow by up to 19 percent by 2030. Currently, few than 42 percent of Worcester residents own their own home and the demand for rentals is increasing.

Additionally, because of the high cost of living, increasing numbers of working class residents are moving out of Boston and MetroWest and into Gateway Cities like Worcester. According to the study, one way to tackle the need for rental housing, is through private investors building affordable apartments, in some cases, by revitalizing abandoned buildings or using vacated lots.

The study showed that since 2008, vacant and



The new apartments at 100 Wall Street, offering upscale amenities, are attracting renters who appreciate fine living and panoramic views of Worcester.

abandoned lots in the city have doubled. Chamber member companies like Trinity Investment and their Courthouse Lofts project, Commerce Associates' renovation of the Central Building, and WinCompanies and their rehabilitation of the Canal and Voke Lofts, have been successful.

One such developer is Robert Branca, from Branded Realty Group. Not only will their new apartment building add to the city's market rate housing stock, it is also having a positive impact on the Grafton Hill area of the city.

In 2015, Branded Realty Group purchased the property located at the site of the iconic El Morocco restaurant. Vacant since 2000, the structure was in ruins and dangerous. The company also purchased the adjacent vacant lots making the new property size 2-acres. The underutilized and abandoned

space will become a new community of residents in this Grafton Hill neighborhood.

During a recent Chamber 360 Pivot Facebook Live event, we took people on a tour of the Wall Street complex where the audience got to virtually experience one of the desirable corner units and the fantastic views of the city afforded by the building's high elevation.

Along with the latest technology, residents can expect home grade kitchen cabinets, washers and dryers, high-end flooring, and an abundant amount of storage space. All these amenities elevate this property to levels not seen in your typical apartment rental. Noteworthy is Branded Realty Group's construction and design plan along with their persistence and hard work that is making this a choice for many. After just a week on the market, the 100 Wall Street Luxury Apartments is already at one third of its rental capacity.

"Clearly this project has had a tremendous impact on the neighborhood, even before the residents have moved in," said Robert Branca.

He added, "The city council had a stated goal of improving the existing housing stock alongside creating new housing. We've seen both achieved in this part of Grafton Hill as we built the complex. Nearby homes have been bought and renovated and more are in the process. Add to this the revitalization of the Shale Street playground, and the effect becomes more noticeable as time passes."

As outlined in the housing study, available on the economic development page of the Chamber's website: worcesterchamber.org, Worcester continues to be an affordable place to live, and growth opportunities in the housing market are out there.



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STEM

MEMBER BUSINESSES SUPPORT SCIENCE LEARNING AT GIRLS INC. WITH RENOVATION, EQUIPMENT, AND EXPERIENCES

By Aviva Luttrell, Correspondent

When Girls Inc. of Worcester was identifying priorities for its \$5 million capital campaign, the non-profit knew that providing young women with STEM experiences and access to cutting-edge technology would continue to be critical in preparing them for the future, but found that resources in its building were severely lacking.

"We knew that girls would benefit greatly from new equipment in so many ways - not only for college and workplace prep - but because they're so inclined to learn through technology," CEO Victoria Waterman said.

So the organization set its sights on creating a modern space equipped with the tools girls need to thrive in STEM fields and beyond. With support from Saint-Gobain, a French corporation with a major manufacturing facility in Worcester, Girls Inc. recently opened a new technology center at its Providence Street location - closing out a round of renovations that also included a new roof, redesigned lobby, upgraded ventilation system, re-vamped staff space and a new café.

"We're just starting to use the space and we're looking forward to seeing where it takes us," Waterman said.

The new Saint-Gobain Technology Center features Chromebooks, Internet access, headphones and comfortable furniture - providing girls with many of the essentials they need to complete school-work remotely and explore more extensive technology-based training.

The center was designed pro bono by Lamoureux Pagano Associates and funded with the help of a five-year, \$50,000 grant from Saint-Gobain Abrasives of North America, according to Brenda Heller, communications and community relations manager for Saint-Gobain. The corporation has a years-long history of volunteering for Girls Inc., beginning with a gym floor renovation in 2013.

"We have great partnerships with so many folks in the community. It's not about the funds, it's about holistic partnerships," Heller said. "When we do grant

funds, we look for opportunities that are beneficial for both organizations and provide a chance to collaborate and make it a partnership. Girls Inc. is one of the best examples of that for us."

Girls Inc. is currently using the Saint-Gobain Technology Center to host a Learning Hub that allows 40 K-12 students to come to the nonprofit for remote school during the week. Through a recent survey, Girls Inc. found that 25 percent of students in the Worcester Public Schools do not have a computer or access to an internet connection resulting in a "digital divide" that has become especially urgent as the COVID-19 pandemic forces many children to learn remotely.

Waterman said in the future, Girls Inc. hopes to install a laser cutter and possibly a 3D printer in the space, and use it to host programs that teach girls how to code.

"We want to host projects that enhance their abilities and make them fall in love with technology and science," she said. "Even if it's teaching soft skills, you can do that through technology and speak to them in the format they enjoy and where they thrive. It's about meeting the girls where they're at."

In addition to supporting the new technology center, Saint-Gobain awarded the organization \$7,500 in seed money for its building renovations in 2017. Its parent company, SageGlass, also donated glass for the center that changes tint in response to sunlight.

"We are firm believers that STEM is a much-needed foundation for our younger generation and we want to be part of that process," Heller said. "Girls Inc.'s mission to empower women and young ladies was a great opportunity for us to say, 'We believe in your organization and we want to support that.'"

Among the ways Saint-Gobain backs that mission



The Saint-Gobain Technology Center at Girls Inc. puts STEM at the forefront of the learning experience for area girls.

is by partnering with Girls Inc.'s Eureka! program to provide young women with meaningful STEM experiences at its R&D facility in Northborough. The five-year program, which begins in eighth grade and continues through high school graduation, helps girls to not only explore career options in the STEM field, but also develop confidence and leadership opportunities at no cost to them.

During the first two summers of the program, the young women spend a week at college campuses in Worcester. The following two summers, they work as "externs" on job sites, shadowing employees to gain first-hand experience at companies like Saint-Gobain, Dell, Boston Scientific and Fallon Health.

"The last summer, they have to find their own opportunities using the networking skills they've learned," Waterman said. "By the time they graduate, it's a really close-knit group. They've grown and learned so much together. This program changes the trajectory of their lives."

Waterman added that the generosity of the community makes it possible for Girls Inc. to provide these types of resources and opportunities to girls in the Worcester area.

"Girls Inc. is such a fabulous organization," Heller said. "We're very fortunate to have organizations like this in the community and many of us feel grateful that we can collaborate with them and help in shaping the future generations."

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**DEADLINE
AHEAD**



Railers Aim for January Start Date

By Cam McGuire, Broadcaster/ Public Relations and Social Media Coordinator, Worcester Railers HC

The Worcester Railers have announced an anticipated start date of January 15, 2021 for their fourth season of ECHL hockey at the DCU Center. It has been an extended off-season for the club, but staff, coaches, and players have not slowed down during the pandemic. The team has held a strong presence in the community throughout the pandemic and were recently awarded the ECHL Community Service Team of the Year Award for the second straight season. "We have always been a community first organization," said Railers COO Mike Myers. "Our owners, Cliff and Susan Rucker, allow us to make a real

difference in our community when it is needed the most. We are proud of our community efforts and thank all of our partners and fans for their support." Since the last game in March, the Railers staff has remained on-board, focusing on season membership sales, working with corporate partners, refreshing the website, and identifying creative strategies to better engage with fans. With the addition of Team President Stephanie Ramey, who joined the club in May after serving as the Executive Director of Discover Central Massachusetts, the Railers are recharged and ready for the 2020-21 season. However, there are still obstacles ahead. "Our team has been working hand-in-hand with the DCU Center along with city and state officials to develop a comprehensive re-opening strategy that will offer our fans a safe and controlled setting to gather," said Ramey. "We wholeheartedly believe that we can launch an ECHL season in Worcester and look forward to sharing the excitement of Railers hockey once again." In addition to the enhanced structure of the front office, the on-ice




The Worcester Railers teamed up the Railers Booster Club to donate 100 backpacks to the Friendly House of Worcester. Railers forwards Drew Callin and Ross Olsson assisted Booster Club President Rich Lundin and Booster Club member Chris O'Shea with delivering the backpacks.



Railers forward Yanick Turcotte skates up the ice at the DCU Center during a game vs. the South Carolina Stingrays.

product should be much improved with veteran coach David Cuniff set to begin his first full season behind the bench. The General Manager and Head Coach of the club has inked several key returning players, including fan-favorites Connor Doherty, Drew Callin, and Ross Olsson. Veteran forward Jordan Smotherman will provide experience and strong leadership as the Railers will look to make the playoffs for the first time since their inaugural season. "Our players and hockey staff are itching to get back on the ice and compete," said Myers. "Over the last several months, Coach Cuniff has done an excellent job compiling a roster that will make a push towards a Kelly Cup. We cannot wait to get our season started and spend time with our hockey family come January." There is a lot to be excited about regarding Worcester Railers hockey, as the team is poised to hit full strides on and off the ice this season. Show your support by purchasing a season membership or by becoming a corporate partner today. Their skates are sharpened and ready to go as the club patiently waits for the green light to play. For more information about the Worcester Railers HC, please visit RailersHC.com.



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Chamber Recognizes Member Businesses with Annual Awards

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty, Correspondent

For the sixth annual event, the Chamber took to Zoom for the first time to recognize some of the region’s most outstanding businesses, owners, and recent historic building restorations. The Annual Business Awards ceremony is held yearly to shine a spotlight on just a few of those members which are the driving force behind the strong and vibrant local business community, contributing to the Chamber’s mission to Recruit, Retain, and Incubate.

In what’s been an anything-but-easy year, 2020’s awards were especially important. As the COVID-19 pandemic caused closures, ensuing economic fallout, and modifications to our everyday lives, many Worcester area businesses, organizations, and people have persevered, oftentimes finding and creating their own solutions and successes. Though everyone couldn’t be all together in person to celebrate their excellence, the Chamber was committed to honoring distinguished recipients for a job well done even when the going gets tough.

SILVER HAMMER AWARDS

The Silver Hammer Awards are presented annually to Chamber members in acknowledgment of construction or rehabilitation projects which have an extraordinary visual and aesthetic impact on the local physical landscape, and have brought new life to some of the region’s most historic assets.

SHREWSBURY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Challenged with wanting to keep the Shrewsbury Public Library in the historic, 117-year-old building, while also offering the community a state-of-the-art, contemporary facility, the Town of Shrewsbury enlisted the help of Worcester-based Lamoureux Pagano & Associates Architects and embarked on a multi-year renovation project to restore the building. Today, the Main Street library is fully accessible with new technology, common public areas, and updated utilities, among other improvements. The \$23 million in renovations has revealed a re-imagined resource hub and learning center which both honors the building’s history and accommodates the community’s current and future needs. Of the project, Lamoureux Pagano President Katie Crockett said, “In so many respects the Library represents what we like doing best: innovative design honoring our region’s cultural heritage; partnering with a progressive community; and having a role in an important, public building designed to encourage community connections.”

COURTHOUSE LOFTS

Soon enough, hundreds of people will be calling the once-empty Worcester Courthouse home, and it’s all thanks to Trinity Development. The 1843 building is being transformed into 118 units of mixed-income housing complete with first-class amenities and a Major Taylor Museum open to the public. Though the already-complex undertaking became even more challenging due to the pandemic, Trinity remains committed to making the \$53 million project a key piece of both Worcester’s Lincoln Square district and overall revitalization efforts by adding to the opportunities for more people to live, work, and play in the Heart of the Commonwealth. “Working in Worcester has been really quite remarkable, and we enjoy unbelievable support from the City administration,” said Michael Lozano, Trinity’s senior project manager for the lofts. “We’re very excited to get to the finish line and welcome our first residents sometime soon.”

STEARNS TAVERN

Stearns Tavern has worn a number of hats since 1812: a tavern, a furniture shop, a house of carpets, and a bank – until being closed in 2013. Its most recent and perhaps most significant transformation, though, is the product of a true collaborative effort by Preservation Worcester, the City of Worcester, and the Seven Hills Foundation. Thanks to their teamwork and 120 donor partners, the centuries-old building has now been refurbished to serve as Seven Hills’ Workforce Training Center, community meeting space, and the Seven Hills

Foundation Cafe. The impressive restoration efforts are allowing the more than 200-year-old tavern to continue to live through history. “I think this has been a great example of how Worcester can come together around a great project and deliver something that’s really transformational to a neighborhood,” said Worcester City Manager Ed Augustus.

JAMES STREET PLACE

What was originally a steel wire manufacturing plant better known as the Worcester Wire Works building is now known as James Street Place after recent renovations turned the Webster Square staple into a home for more than 100 office and retail tenants. Working with approval from Worcester’s Historical Commission, R. W. Mura & Company completely refashioned the facade of the once drab, 1920’s building to create an elegant and updated look while still preserving its history. The work poured into re-imagining this property on has allowed other businesses to grow and prosper in a happening area of the city where they’ll soon be joined by other new developments.

RUSSO ITALIAN RESTAURANT

The fifth and final 2020 Silver Hammer was awarded to Worcester native and owner of Russo Italian Restaurant, Ed Russo. Located at 65 Water Street in the city’s historic Canal District, the space underwent a full renovation before opening to the public in June of 2019 as the latest addition to Russo’s portfolio – joining the already-successful Lock50 Restaurant just steps away. Exposed brick, a wine cave, and flickering gas-like lighting, complete the “old-school Italian restaurant” look and set the tone for family-style, homemade dinners. Opening this new spot in a fast-growing and vibrant Worcester neighborhood once again emphasizes Russo’s commitment to expanding and strengthening the region’s hospitality scene, while helping drive traffic to the Heart of the Commonwealth.

2020 HONOREES

ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR

For establishing the all-natural, gluten-free, sauce and spice company Alicia’s Homemade in 2015, owner and founder Alicia Haddad was named Entrepreneur of the Year. Although the spices, rubs, dips, and sauces are made with wholesome ingredients and packed with flavor, it’s the story of the lady behind this woman-owned and -operated company which makes it all the more remarkable. Ms. Haddad’s passion for baking sugar cookies as a kid and tinkering with recipes stuck with her into adulthood, when she was able to take the risk of opening her own business. Starting from scratch – whether it be in the kitchen or the entrepreneurial world – requires the determination and spirit of someone like Ms. Haddad, which is why Alicia’s Homemade has been successful since opening.

SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

While COVID-19 and related shutdowns have forced many businesses – restaurants and the hospitality industry being hit especially hard – to shutter, doors at The Pickle Barrel Restaurant and Deli have remained open. Despite knowing they wouldn’t turn much of a profit during the time when eateries were restricted to take-out only, owner Gus Giannakis made the decision to stay open in order to support his employees and ensure the Pleasant Street community still had a



The Children’s Courtyard at the Shrewsbury Public Library was designed by Chamber member Lamoureux Pagano | Architects who received a Silver Hammer Award and are celebrating their 50th anniversary this year.

place to turn to for a hot meal. Calling the Pickle Barrel “a small business with a big heart,” Chamber President and CEO Tim Murray said, “It’s selflessness like this which keeps neighborhoods above water and makes us proud to represent this business community.”

CHAMBER AMBASSADOR OF THE YEAR

A group of volunteers who provide assistance at events, conduct member recruitment, and help other members navigate the organization’s available services, Chamber Ambassadors act as an extension of the Chamber staff. Neal Manchester, a senior sales executive for The Allied Group, was recognized as Chamber Ambassador of the Year for his efforts in helping to tell the Worcester Chamber’s story. Whether it be by sharing his knowledge of membership with other businesses, working the registration table at Business After Hours, or facilitating ribbon cutting ceremonies, Membership Sales and Services Representative Kristen Luna says Mr. Manchester “is always the first to ask: ‘How can I help?’ and lend a hand no matter what. He’s there and he’s reliable. Neal goes above and beyond.”

CHAMBER ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

An attorney at Mirick O’Connell, D. Moschos is a member of the firm’s Labor, Employment, and Employee Benefits Group, earning many top honors over the years for his work. But outside of the office, he’s also volunteered to share his extensive knowledge of, and experience in, labor and employment law. He previously served as chair of the Chamber’s Board of Directors, supported the Worcester Area Business Education Foundation, and participated in Chamber events as a panelist. Thanks to Mr. Moschos, other Chamber members have been able to get a better understanding of new regulations as they were passed at the federal and state levels, thereby helping the Chamber better support the business community. “I’m proud to be an advocate for the Chamber,” said Mr. Moschos upon receiving the award. “I invite everyone here tonight and everyone in the community to advocate for the Chamber – the only business voice left in our community today.”

JOE COHEN RETAILER OF THE YEAR

It was just a year ago that Your CBD Store opened their doors on Worcester’s Stafford Street, and business is already booming. From products which benefit overall wellness, to those which help manage stress or promote better sleep, everything they sell is all-natural and hemp-derived. With so many different offerings, the store’s owners believe it’s important for customers to be informed about what’s best for them. “The knowledgeable and friendly staff at Your CBD Store are committed to

SEE AWARDS, NEXT PAGE

nizing this fortunate position, despite the pandemic's disruption to their business operations, FLEXcon was able to manufacture a couple of new products for the benefit of their community. During the time when health care facilities were running dangerously low on PPE, Mr. Winkler says they got calls from local hospitals asking if they make things like face shields, and if not, could they. "So, we pulled together a small team of people into a conference room and 36 hours later, they had a prototype of a face shield," he said. Shortly thereafter, it was mass produced using materials they already had in house and donated by the tens of thousands to regional hospitals, doctors' offices, and first responders. Others were eventually sold at a low cost all around the nation. The same was true of tent hoods. Again, Mr. Winkler says, they got a call asking if they could manufacture these clear tents which a health care worker puts over their head to test if their N95 mask is working properly. The

FLEXcon team had a prototype within 24 hours and was able to get those produced for the front line workers as well. "It's not a significant part of our revenue," Mr. Winkler said, "Yet it's a very significant thing we're doing to help out and at least do what we can to fight this battle of COVID." As another sign of their commitment to the community, FLEXcon also created maker kits using cut up pieces of materials, which they donated to the Spencer-East Brookfield Regional School District as a way for local kids to keep their hands and minds busy while stuck at home. **IT** Almost every aspect of our everyday lives – work, school, and social gatherings – has transitioned to the virtual world, which is why Domitek, a Worcester-based IT support company, was also deemed an essential business. With many now needing to work from home, Domitek's biggest challenge was to come up with fast solutions

to shift some clients to a fully remote workforce, while still maintaining their data security. This was particularly important as their own staff were providing computer support services remotely, too, they didn't want to compromise a client's data. "We needed to make sure we had the proper IT policies in place to ensure we weren't the ones making our customers vulnerable as well," said Domitek Founder and CEO Libis Bueno. In addition to establishing or re-evaluating safe and secure remote work systems, Domitek was seeing high demand around one of their newer applications for voice over internet phone systems, which allows for employees to still take phone calls remotely even when their physical office was closed. "From an overall standpoint," said Domitek's Director of Operations Manny Gonzalez, COVID-19 "hasn't really changed what we do," it has just required some tweaks be made to how they do it. "Our focus has always

been: How do we help our clients get the most out of their technology and be as efficient and productive as possible? And that doesn't change for us," Mr. Gonzalez said. In respect to how the business community at large has been affected by the pandemic, Mr. Bueno says he realizes the uncertainty of everything is weighing on everyone's minds. Domitek has been morphing into more of a physical security company over the last few years, and now, with offices being left vacant, it opens up more potential for break-ins. Mr. Bueno says this is another market segment which Domitek is able to answer the call for. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all types of businesses no matter the industry. Some say they've made it this far and are poised to make it through to the other side okay. But as the country is seeing another spike in cases, it's unclear exactly what's in store for the future of the national and local economy.

Need Maps? We Got 'Em!

Every 18 months, the chamber contracts with a third party company to produce a street map of Worcester. Many hotels, visitor centers, and other points of interest display them for travelers who use them to get their bearings within the city. Many HR departments also request them to help staff new to Worcester become acquainted.



GET YOURS by contacting Brenda Elmes at the Chamber: 508.753.2924 or belmes@worchesterchamber.org

TAKE THE CALL!

The Chamber has partnered with Livability Media, a nationwide, content marketing and media company to produce a print magazine and web content highlighting the region's many assets. Livability will tell our story with outstanding content and compelling design to help us attract talent, investment, and tourism. This marketing piece content will help the Chamber to attract investment, create jobs, and draw talent to our communities. And, it can help you get the word out to a new audience. The Livability team will reach out soon with information, or, you may contact the Chamber: 508.753.2924.

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AWARDS, CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

being transparent with clients, and show an enthusiasm for the products they sell," said Chamber Board of Directors Chair Bob Cox. "This style of business is a clear indication to us that they truly care about the well-being of the people and animals they serve," Mr. Cox added, as he presented them the Joe Cohen Retailer of the Year Award.

FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Owners of Nothing Bundt Cakes in Shrewsbury, husband-and-wife duo Alan and Liz Gulachenski, also opened their doors last fall, and they've been serving up sweetness everyday since. Their homemade, handcrafted bundt cakes which come in a number of flavors, promise to bring a taste of nostalgia to the table and offer the warmth and affection many need in a year like 2020 – one they say has presented no shortage of challenges for their new business. "We couldn't be more thankful and proud of the support we've received from our community during this time," Mr. Gulachenski said. Being recognized for their accomplished first year in business and their contributions to the local business community, the Gulachenskis went on to further prove their generosity during the awards ceremony by inviting everyone in attendance to come down to the shop for a bundt cake on the house.

MINORITY-OWNED BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

For the first time ever, the Chamber presented a Minority-Owned Business of the Year Award to honor a minority-owned member business for their outstanding commitment and dedication to the organization's mission, vision, and values. As a woman-owned construction company, Fisher Con-

tracting Corporation has had to overcome many obstacles to thrive. But for the last 30-plus years, they've tackled projects all over the New England region and beyond, even helping with the initial demolitions for the site of Polar Park. In a male-dominated industry, this caliber of success for owner Charran Fisher is a point of pride. "It's a great honor, and to pioneer an award means even more for me," Ms. Fisher said. "Although Fisher Contracting is being recognized today, I'm really accepting this award on behalf of all minority- and women-owned businesses like mine" which continue to pave the way for others.

RBK BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Named after the former head of the Worcester Chamber of Commerce, the Richard B. Kennedy Business of the Year award is given annually to one member business for outstanding commitment to the Chamber's mission and values. Amidst the hurdles 2020 has presented via COVID-19, plastic and rubber manufacturer FLEXcon Company in Spencer rose to the occasion to protect the Central Mass community. Answering the call for more PPE at the pandemic's peak, the team at FLEXcon quickly switched gears from their regular operations in order to produce tens of thousands of face shields using materials they already had in house. Many of those shields were donated to local health care facilities, emergency responders, and others working on the frontlines to battle coronavirus in our communities. Once again, the Chamber offers congratulations to all our 2020 award winners and a sincere thanks for all you do in our business community.

Medicare Annual Election Period During the Time of COVID

Contributed by Fallon Health

The ongoing coronavirus crisis presents challenges for all of us. At Fallon Health, we believe it's important that we support one another during this time—within our communities of friends, families, neighborhoods and businesses. And as an essential business, we have remained fully operational since the onset—continuing to serve the needs of our members, as well as those who are looking for insurance coverage.

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF MEDICARE

People should enroll in Medicare when they first become eligible. Timely enrollment ensures you have coverage when you need it and helps you avoid financial penalties. While some become eligible for Medicare due to a disability or illness, most people become eligible for Medicare at age 65. You may join Medicare during your Initial Enrollment Period—a seven-month time frame which includes the three months prior to the month of your 65th birthday, the month of your birthday, and the three months after. To start enrollment, you'll need to contact the Social Security Administration. Some people will be automatically enrolled in Medicare, but it's best to start the process yourself. This is true even if you plan to continue working for a while after you turn 65.

Now is the time when people with Medicare can change their plan, but like everything else this year, our approach to Medicare's Annual Election Period will look a little different. First, here are a few of the basics about Medicare's Annual Election Period:

- Sometimes referred to as open enrollment, Medicare's Annual Election Period takes place between October 15 and December 7 each year.
- People eligible for Medicare can join a plan, switch plans and change their coverage during this time.
- To be eligible for Medicare Advantage plans, like Fallon Medicare Plus, a person must:
 - Be enrolled in Medicare Parts A and B
 - Continue to pay their Medicare Part B premium, if not otherwise paid for under Medicaid or by another third party
 - Reside in the service area

Please note: Medicare Advantage Special Needs Plans will have additional requirements.

LEARNING ABOUT FALLON MEDICARE PLUS ENROLLMENT OPTIONS

Because of COVID 19, we're changing our procedures a little bit this year. There are fewer person-to-person interactions and more virtual meetings. Fallon is holding several virtual presentations on Medicare Advantage and Medicare Supplement plans. Learn about the plans Fallon has to offer at a time that's convenient for you. See a schedule here (fallonhealth.org/find-insurance).

We're also scheduling one-on-one meetings with Fallon representatives who can help you decide which plan is best for you. If you'd like to meet with a Fallon representative, please call 1-888-377-1980 (TRS 711), 8 am – 8 pm seven days a week, or email: MedicareSalesOperations@fallonhealth.org. At this time, one-on-one meetings will be held via phone or video.

Additionally, we're offering two video presentations, which can be found on our website:

- Medicare 101
- Medicare Advantage and Medicare Supplement

Visit fallonhealth.org/medicare to view the presentations.

We have put our annual enrollment printed materials on our website, and all are available to download (fallonhealth.org/find-insurance/medicare). We invite you to browse through the materials to see what benefits and services Fallon is offering for 2021.

- For those who want to enroll in Fallon Medicare Plus, there are several options:
- Go to Fallon's website, fallonhealth.org/medicare, and enroll there. Members may also enroll through Medicare's online enrollment center at medicare.gov.
 - Enroll by phone at 1-888-377-1980 (TRS 711).
 - Fill out the paper form included in Fallon's enrollment booklet.

Please note: These options do not all apply to NaviCare plans.

Fallon is here to help, whether you're new to Medicare, or have been a member for a long time. With over 40 years of experience, we know how to make Medicare easy to understand. And our corporate offices are here in Worcester—right in your backyard.

For more information about Fallon Health's 2021 Medicare and Medicare Advantage offerings during the open enrollment season underway now through December 7, please visit fallonhealth.org/medicare.

New 2021 CMS Star Rating

We are very proud that Fallon has just received a 4.5 Star Rating (out of 5) for 2021 from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for our Medicare Advantage plans.

This high score highlights the organization's commitment to providing quality products and services to its members. Scores are based on more than 40 care and service quality measures across several categories, including staying healthy, managing chronic conditions, member satisfaction, customer service and pharmacy services.


"We are thrilled to have a strong 4.5 Medicare Star Rating for our Medicare Advantage plans—Fallon Medicare Plus™ and NaviCare®—for 2021," said Richard Burke, President and CEO of Fallon Health. "Fallon rallied around efforts to raise the bar, and I am pleased our organization's commitment to providing excellent care and services to the diverse members we serve has been verified by CMS."

"The Star Ratings serve as a useful and unbiased guide for Medicare beneficiaries as they research the plan that is right for them," explained Deborah Daviau, Vice President of Medicare and Executive Director of NaviCare for Fallon Health. "In the midst of the current pandemic, health care is more top of mind than ever before. With more than 40 years of experience offering Medicare solutions, Fallon is proud to continue our tradition of providing quality plans as recognized by the 4.5-Star Rating."

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Tourism, Hotels, Supporting the Sector

By Monique M. Messier, Executive Director, Discover Central Massachusetts

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the state in March, no one predicted it would take this long to recover. In fact, many events were rescheduled to the fall. Those are now postponed again or canceled altogether.

The tourism industry, the third largest sector in the state, has suffered greatly and continues to teeter on the brink of collapse. Tourism reaches farther and wider than most realize employing thousands of hard-working people. I do not know anyone who doesn't see the plethora of negative effects associated with the pandemic. But, let me switch it up and take a look at the albeit unlikely positive outcomes, in certain contexts, for the city and the region.

Most associated with tourism are area hotels and the September numbers are in. Much like the rest of the summer, the occupancy rate for the City of Worcester came in the low 40's, 41.5 to be exact according to Smith Travel Research (STR).

There are 25 cities across the state of Massachusetts running from Boston and the Cape and the Islands all the way to the tip of the Berkshires that have hotels reporting their occupancy numbers into the STR report each month. Of those 25 cities, 48% have occupancy levels for the month of September at 41% and higher while the remaining 52% fell below that benchmark. Of the 48% three towns or 25%, Worcester, Auburn, and Sturbridge all located in Central Mass. had occupancy rates of 41.5%, 50.7% and 41.8%

respectively for the reporting period. Central Massachusetts' year-to-date occupancy levels came in at 39 percent while the state of Massachusetts' occupancy for the same time period landed at 37.2 percent.

So, what do those numbers mean? In the industry, Central Mass is outpacing the rest of the state by almost 1 percent and are neck and neck with New England which is showing an overall year-to-date occupancy rate of 39.3 percent. While these numbers are not by any means "crushing it," they do tell a positive story.

The hotel community has worked diligently to ensure guests feel comfortable, safe and confident when traveling to Central Mass to stay overnight for business, personal, or leisure travel reasons. And, they have a message they want travelers and the community to hear.

"We are open, we are clean, we are safe" stated by Mary Simone, general manager of the AC Marriott.

Onicia Mends, the director of sales at the Residence Inn puts it this way, "We are ensuring that everyone feels safe and taken care of when they walk through our doors. We implemented new protocols developed with guidelines from the CDC, our brand partners and public health guidelines."

Some of their protocols include the addition of hand sanitation stations added throughout the hotel, deep cleaning of the rooms between stays, consistently and frequently disinfect-

ing all high-touch items like elevator buttons, and providing surface wipes in every room.

The Hilton Garden Inn located in downtown Worcester is also fighting back against COVID-19 with the recent announcement of the installation of bipolar ionization system technology to neutralize coronavirus air particulates by 99.92% as outlined by their general manager, KC Jones in a press release this October. The hotel's director of sales, Emily Mulhane explained, "Our goal with installing AtmosAir is to ensure that we are doing everything possible to create a safe and comfortable environment for our guests and employees. We feel that taking this extra step is necessary to ensuring all of our guests have peace of mind when staying with us."

The region's hotels are not only implementing safety protocols but have come up with many new and creative ways to stay relevant in the local community.

The Publick House in Sturbridge recently released a "Zoom package" that can be purchased in advance of a meeting consisting of a box with fresh made goods shipped to attendees' homes. Known for their decadent baked goods, the include freshly made sweet treats, a coffee mug, and a pen and note pad - just what you would get onsite in one of their meeting rooms. Connie Pion, director of hotel sales, shared that you can also send this Zoom box to your child's teacher,



favorite health care provider, essential worker, or anyone needing a little lift in their day.

For those looking for a change of scenery, especially if you're working from home, most hotels are offering packages for individuals such as the daily use of a business hotel with complimentary wi-fi and many other amenities. More information on these specials can be found on the individual hotel websites.

Tourism plays a major role in the health of the Massachusetts economy and the majority of those serving travelers are small businesses and the goods and services they provide are large and varied. Discover Central MA encourages the community to buy local as often as possible. And remember, the hotels are open, they are safe, they are clean and they are ready to welcome you.



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WORCESTER SPORTS STREET:

Altered, Shortened Season Still Provides Escape and Entertainment for Sports Lovers

By Timothy P. Murray, President and CEO

Since the last edition of Sports Street, we have seen several of the professional sports leagues wrap up their seasons in the “bubble.” The LA Lakers, led by LeBron James, captured their 18th NBA Championship tying the Celtics for the teams with the most championships. The scrappy Miami Heat, ironically LeBron’s former team, made a valiant run with Jimmy Butler playing some inspiring gut check basketball. Unfortunately, the Celtics were unable to beat the Heat in the Conference Finals, likely a result of an over-reliance on three-point shots. Undoubtedly Celtics general manger, Danny Ainge needs to find personnel that will give the C’s a stronger inside presence both offensively and defensively.

The Boston Bruins were also dispatched in the second round of play-off action by the faster and physically dominant Tampa Bay Lightning who went on to capture the NHL’s Stanley Cup Championship. Following the season, the Bruins’ free agent defenseman Tony King signed with the St. Louis Blues and captain Zdeno Chara remains unsigned. The state of the Bruins and start date for the NHL season are two lingering questions for hockey fans.

Locally, ice hockey players and fans were thrilled to have the rinks reopened for 6 weeks followed by a shutdown due to COVID-19 spikes linked to rinks. The Worcester Railers, our local pro hockey team, announced a revised start date for the 2020-2021 ECHL season – January 15, 2021. They’ll play a 62-game season, the fourth and a potential catalyst for the reopening of the dormant DCU Center.

The team has been working closely with DCU Center leadership to develop a comprehensive reopening plan that embraces social distancing safety protocols, including spaced seating, robust cleaning and controlling pedestrian traffic flow. Game attendance will be capped. Currently, the Railers have 17 players under contract for the 2020-2021 season.

While the leaves fall, and New Englanders begin to prepare for winter, a glimpse of what spring 2021 might look like was provided when the grass sod was delivered and installed at Polar Park. While the park is still under construction, the green grass was a welcome sight at the future home of the Worcester Red Sox and was a significant milestone for many.

The Kelley Square traffic peanut, Green Island Boulevard, and the Worcester Public Market are adding a new level of vibrancy and density to the Canal District and Green Island neighborhoods with new announcements in the works.

If we want to see sports continue through the winter months and beyond we must continue to wear masks, social distance, and wash our hands regularly.

As of the deadline for this edition of Sports Street, it looks like the Tom Brady-led Tampa Bay Buccaneers will be playing playoff football and the Bill Belichick-led New England Patriots are not. Yet, I would not bet against Belichick and the Patriots turning things around in the second half of the season. The question is, *will it be enough or in time for the Patriots to make a playoff run.*

Construction and Real Estate Roundtable

By Amanda Cassels, Intern, Worcester State University

On October 1, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce hosted a Construction and Real Estate Roundtable to introduce Worcester’s new chief financial officer, Timothy J. McGourthy, and city assessor, Samuel E. Konieczny, MMA. The roundtable provided an opportunity for members of the real estate and construction sectors to meet the two new City of Worcester officials who they often work with and who facilitate the business they do with the city.

As CFO for the City of Worcester, Tim McGourthy oversees budgeting, treasury, assessing, procurement, and energy and asset management functions. Mr. McGourthy has 25 years of experience focused on economic growth and works to support broader goals to adapt to the needs of the city’s neighborhoods and community.

With a background of 10 years in assessing, Sam Konieczny, MMA, took on this new roll as Worcester City Assessor in April 2020 with plenty of municipal experience under he belt having served as the chief assessor for Agawam, MA. As assessor, Mr. Konieczny oversees property valuations in the city including tangible personal property owned by businesses in the city. He also evaluates applications for abatements or re-assessments.

The Chamber invited the two speakers to the roundtable, sponsored by Bowditch & Dewey, to assist members in the construction and real estate industries by helping them understand the roles of these departments and to build relationships with them.

If you did not have the opportunity to join the Chamber for the roundtable please feel free to contact Alex Guardiola, Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy and he will send you the recording.

ABOUT THE ROUNDTABLES | The Chamber’s roundtable forums are opportunities for area professionals in a variety of industry sectors to: exchange ideas and share updates and best practices in the industry and have an open discussion about the issues that impact specific industries. Current roundtables are:

- Diverse Professional Roundtable
- Human Resources Roundtable
- Construction & Real Estate Roundtable
- Health Care Roundtable
- Manufacturing Roundtable
- Financial Services Roundtable

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