

CHAMBER EXCHANGE

THE NEWSPAPER

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

- AVTE Update, 3
- Ice Center, 4
- Entrepreneurship, 7
- Wormtown Brews, 8
- Affiliates, 9
- Food Hub, 10
- Legal Matters, 11
- Retirement, 12
- Industry Moves, 15
- StartUp Worc., 16
- Leadership Worc. 17
- Pacesetters, 19

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Time To Play Ball



Debut of Polar Park, WooSox Set for Spring

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty
Correspondent

WORCESTER - The Worcester Red Sox (WooSox) have announced that its inaugural season at the new Polar Park field will begin this May. The decision followed speculation over when and how Minor League Baseball would take form this year amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The 2020 MiLB season was canceled due to COVID-19. Work on the Triple-A affiliate team's new stomping grounds started in summer 2019 under an already-aggressive construction timeline with a scheduled completion date of April 2021.

Despite weeks of construction delays

Photo Credit: Joe Jacobs, Worcester Red Sox

WooSox, the Triple-A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox, will make its Polar Park debut with a homestand run in May.

WOOSOX, PG. 24 (BACK COVER)

Development Interest in Canal District Grows

By Dominique Goyette-Connerty
Correspondent

MADISON PROPERTIES

WORCESTER - "If you build it, they will come." This spin on the iconic Field of Dreams line may have been the hope of city leaders when they set out to build Polar Park, and so far, their wish is coming true.

When plans to relocate the Boston Red Sox's Triple-A affiliate team in Worcester were agreed to back in 2018, Madison Properties was set to transform the land surrounding the ballpark with mixed-use development projects.

Since the initial announcement though, the Canal District has attracted more interest from other developers looking to capitalize on the heightened attention in the already-vibrant neighborhood.

Even prior to Polar Park, Boston-based developer Madison Properties had experience working in Worcester. In the early 2000s, they bought land at the former U.S. Steel factory on Route 146, ultimately developing it into what is now the Sam's Club and Walmart shopping center. So when the company's president Denis Dowdle returned in 2017 for lunch with Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Tim Murray, he saw with his own eyes why everyone was so abuzz about a so-called "Worcester Renaissance."

Just from walking around the city that afternoon, Mr. Dowdle said, "I understood the transformative nature of what was happening downtown. I drove back to Boston and said, 'You know, it would be fun to try and take



This early rendering shows the ballpark and surrounding proposed development area.

advantage of that momentum being created in the city." A call to property owner Wyman-Gordon revealed there was a fairly large piece of vacant land in the city's Canal District and Green Island neighborhood.

"My bet at the time was: if I was able to buy a big chunk of land in downtown Worcester that I didn't have any immediate plans for, we could

do something good with it over the long term," Mr. Dowdle recalled. He said Madison Properties had the land under contract and was well on its way to acquiring it when, right before closing, the concept of the Pawtucket Red Sox relocating to Worcester came up.

DEVELOPMENT, PAGE 14



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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.

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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.

WORCESTER REGIONAL CHAMBER CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MARCH

- March 10** - 10:00 am - Seminar Series: Leading in a Hybrid World
Sponsor: TDBank
- March 16** - 10:00 am - President's Council: Senator Eric Lesser
Sponsors: Fallon Health & Marsh McLennan
- March 16** - 12 noon - Construction & Real Estate Roundtable: "Lessons in Building a Ball Park" - Sponsors: Bowditch & Dewey & IBEW Local 96
- March 17** - 9:00 am - Diverse Professional Roundtable "Mind Mapping"
Sponsor: BC/BS of Massachusetts
- Applications Now Available** - Leadership Worcester

APRIL

- April 6** - 2:00 pm - HR Roundtable "HR for the Non-HR Professional"
Sponsors: Worcester State University, Aetna, Supporting: Bowditch & Dewey
- April 13** - 10:00 am - Seminar Series: "Can Employers Require COVID Vaccine"
Sponsor: TD Bank
- April 15** - 4:00 pm - Business After Hours with Affiliate Partners
Sponsors: Country Bank & The Guru Tax & Financial Services
- April 22** - 6:00 pm - Diverse Professional Roundtable "Cocktail Connection"
Sponsor: BC/BS of Massachusetts
- April 27** - 10:00 am - Financial Services Roundtable
Sponsors: Bowditch & Dewey, Supporting Sponsor: Country Bank

MAY

- May 11** - 10:00 am - Seminar Series: Financial Wellness - Sponsor: TD Bank
- May 20** - 4:00 pm - Business After Hours and Annual Chamber Awards
Sponsor: Fidelity Bank, Supporting Sponsor: Atlas Distributing
- May 20** - 8:00 am - Diverse Professional Roundtable: "CEO Breakfast"
Sponsor: BC/BS of Massachusetts
- TBD** - Construction & Real Estate Roundtable - Sponsor: Bowditch & Dewey
- TBD** - Manufacturing Roundtable - Sponsors: FLEXcon, AIS
- TBD** - Business & Government Forum
Presenting Sponsor: BC/BS of Mass., Supporting Sponsor: Ventry Associates

JUNE

- June 14-17** - 10-11:30 am - Planning for Equitable Future, Economy, Justice, Education
Presented By: Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce
- June 21** - 31st William J. Short Memorial Classic, Charter Oak Country Club

ACTION AGENDA - Alliance for Vocational Technical Education

The single biggest issue that the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce (WRCC) staff hears from our broad membership base on a regular basis - regardless of the member company's size or sector of the economy that it operates in - is the need for skilled and motivated employees. As a result, the WRCC is heavily involved and leading a variety of workforce development initiatives and partnerships to assist our member businesses and provide economic opportunity for area residents.

One of those initiatives is the Alliance for Vocational Technical Education (AVTE), which was launched in 2015 by the WRCC, Massachusetts Community Action Network and Massachusetts Alliance for Vocational School Administrators. The creation of AVTE followed a successful statewide summit on vocational technical education held by the three organizations in 2014, which brought stakeholders from across the state to Worcester's DCU Center to discuss strategies to expand access to the high-quality Chapter 74 vocational/technical programs offered by our vocational technical schools and increasingly by our traditional comprehensive high schools as well.

Since 2015 through strong advocacy and collaboration, AVTE has been able to secure funding to expand access to vocational technical programs across the state and reduce the statewide waiting list of students seeking to participate in these successful programs.

During the past 12 months, AVTE working with the Baker-Polito Administration and state legislature helped secure funding for the following:

- 1.) Capital Skills Grant Program - for over 10 years, this program, and its predecessor, the Vocational Opportunities Challenge Grants, has provided millions of dollars in funding to vocational/technical high schools and comprehensive high schools to modernize and/or procure equipment to expand Chapter 74 programs for students.
- 2.) AVTE, working with the state legislature was able to expand funding for a new line item in the budget for dual enrollment programs that allow students at comprehensive high schools to attend vocational/technical high schools after school several days a week for training in a Chapter 74 vocational technical program.
- 3.) Most recently, AVTE working with the house and senate economic development committees and their respective Chairs, Representative Ferrante and Senator Lesser, were successful in securing \$15 million in state bond authorization for new construction and renovation for vocational/technical program expansion in the economic development bill recently signed by Gov. Charlie Baker.

Looking ahead to the current legislative session - much of it centered around the Fiscal Year 2022 state budget, which goes into effect July 1, 2021 - the AVTE coalition is advancing an ambitious seven-point action agenda. We believe that if this agenda is approved, it will provide access to Chapter 74 vocational/technical students for all students that seek



Tim Murray

this successful model of education that combines academics with hands-on skills training, work relevant certificates, credentials, and licenses. The AVTE Legislative and Policy 2021 action agenda includes:

- 1) A \$3 billion dollar bonding authorization to renovate, expand and build new vocational/technical schools and programs at both vocational/technical and comprehensive high schools;
 - 2) Establishing a Career Technical Education Funding Commission to advise on best ways to proceed on renovating, expanding and/or building new schools;
 - 3) Allowing longer term leasing of facilities available so schools can move quickly to expand vocational/technical programs;
 - 4) Establishing a Deputy Commissioner of Career Technical Education and an Office of Career Technical Education at DESE to work with local elected officials, regional vocational/technical and comprehensive high school superintendents to develop regional plans to expand access;
 - 5) Eliminating the current one-year delay in state funding to cover the costs of increased enrollments in regional vocational technical schools;
 - 6) Empowers communities in a regional vocational school district to add school building debt payments above their levy limits so they do not have to choose between modernizing these schools and other budget needs;
 - 7) Expands seats on the School Building Authority's Advisory Committee to include representatives from AVTE and the MA Associations of Vocations Administrators.
- As recently confirmed by employment data from MassHire of Central Mass, we must expand vocational/technical training to meet the needs of area employers as well as across the state. The WRCC will continue to stay focused on this, working closely with our elected and educational leaders. In doing so we increase access to education and economic opportunity and strengthen our economy.

- Timothy P. Murray is President and CEO of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, and a former Worcester city mayor and Lt. Governor of Massachusetts.

ICE TIME - Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center Benefits from Lifted Curfew

WORCESTER - The Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center, a twin-rink, state-of-the-art recreational facility, has brought vibrance and economic life to the heart of the Canal District since its inception in August 2017 bringing in roughly 550,000 visitors annually. The 110,000 sq. ft. venue is home to local college and prep school hockey teams, youth and adult hockey leagues, learn-to-skate programs, Worcester Railers HC practices, sports camps, and figure skating clinics. With primary tenants like the popular new restaurant and brewery, Bay State Brewing Co., the Ice Center doors are continuously revolving, and the rinks are always bustling with activity.

Upon the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, like many local non-essential establishments, the Ice Center was mandated to close. The uncertainty of the circumstances surrounding the virus brought about a sense of uneasiness and frustration to flourishing Canal District businesses. Understandably, the Ice Center's re-opening on June 7 reinstated a feeling of normalcy in the community.

"We were very fortunate to be able to open our doors last June with the transition to Phase II of the state's reopening plan," said Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center General Manager, Derek Alfama. "Although there were capacity limitations, we were



After three months and with Massachusetts COVID-19 numbers trending in the right direction, the curfew at the Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center was recently lifted on Jan. 25.

able to make it work by implementing safety protocols."

Re-opening would only prove to be half the battle. Management at the Ice Center had to adjust once again when the Baker-Polito Administration

enacted a 9:30 pm state-wide curfew in November. As a result, youth hockey practices that were normally 60 minutes had to temporarily be reduced to 45-50 minutes to ensure all teams had ice time.

"Having to shut down by 9:30pm every night made it very tough for us to schedule on ice activities," Mr. Alfama said. "I don't think a lot of people realize that our last ice slot usually ends at 11 pm."

After three months and with Massachusetts COVID-19 numbers trending in the right direction, the curfew was recently lifted on Jan. 25.

"The lifting of the state curfew allowed us to get back to our normal weekly routines," Mr. Alfama said. "It has been awesome to see our adult hockey leagues, youth hockey, colleges, and even our curling leagues get back to their regularly scheduled programs."

COVID-19 safety protocols enacted back in June remain in place. All patrons must digitally check-in, give information at the front desk, masks are required, and social distancing is enforced. Earlier in the fall, a "no spectator" rule was initiated for hockey games and practices. The rule has since been modified, and the Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center currently allows one spectator per player for games only.

"The layout and protocols put in place are necessary for us to operate efficiently and - most importantly - safely," Mr. Alfama said. "We are looking forward to the day when we get back to 100% normalcy. For now, we're grateful for the little victories."



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DIVERSITY - Union Entrepreneur Overcomes Challenges

By Virginia Murphy

WORCESTER - Minority-owned and women-owned businesses continue to grow here in Worcester, and Charran Fisher, a black and native American woman, is on the front lines. She's the owner of Fisher Contracting Corporation, and not only started her own company but has been a pioneer in a male-dominated construction industry.

Ms. Fisher started her company in 1998, which self-performs carpentry, demolition, trucking and dumpsters. Charran began her career as a grant writer, and before long started working part time with her husband, Edward Fisher, at his company E.G. Fisher Construction.

Being a minority female in the industry, she saw the potential to fill the industry's mandated goals of minority and female workers on construction sites and how it was not being fulfilled at the time. She started Fisher Contracting Corporation at the age of 23, first working on state projects, and soon evolved to federal projects, having worked with the United States Coast Guard, Department of the Navy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Her success in the federal arena earned her the 2011 SBA Minority Business Person of the Year award.

Ms. Fisher knew walking into bid

proposal meetings, there would be biases in the room, for not only being a minority, but for being a woman. At times, it can be difficult, she said, but coming from a line of female entrepreneurs and hard-working women, she has always had the support from her family, along with her biggest supporter, her husband Ed.

Four years ago, Charran turned Fisher Contracting into an all-union company. Why the transition of going all-union? Ms. Fisher says there were the same needs and goals that were not being met on the union side and more opportunities to be on large union projects. In addition, the unions provide a plethora of training for their workforce, which essentially means higher skilled employees.

Her first full union project was with the Encore Casino (formerly Wynn Casino) in Everett, MA. A project she is proud to say met and exceeded the diversity workforce goals for women and people of color who worked on the project.

Being all union based has allowed more doors to open, especially here in Worcester. An example of this includes Gilbane's project, Polar Park.

Her company worked on the removal of asbestos prior to demolition. Here she exceeded the goals for the number of women on the project as well. Just like seeing female referees officiate the Superbowl, you get the same feeling seeing women on construction sites; it's just a proud moment each and every time.

Another historic project she was involved with was working for Tocci Building Corporation on the renovation of the old Worcester Courthouse, The Courthouse Lofts. Here her company worked with the local Carpenters Union, centered on general conditions and safety.

Fisher Contracting just received the 2020 Minority Business of the Year award from the Worcester Chamber of Commerce, the first of its kind. Mrs. Fisher praises local city people like Mr. Tim Murray, president & CEO of the Worcester Chamber of Commerce and Mr. Peter Dunn, executive director of Economic Development here in Worcester, for always taking calls and being supportive. Looking ahead, Fisher Contracting Corp is currently negotiating a contract to work on a new UMass project here in

Worcester.

Ms. Fisher likes seeing the potential as more projects come to fruition to Worcester. She is a Worcester resident, and working closer to home is satisfying. She would like to see more minorities and females on the job. She recalls hiring a female operator to run an excavator at her project at Polar Park and notes that is something you just do not see here in Worcester. When asked, what would you tell the girls of the future who may have interest in the construction world? Charran replied, education. "If you can inform students about the opportunity in the industry," she said, "and have educators in front of our students, and provide information, we will start to see more women entering the field of contracting and construction."

Ms. Fisher feels she is successful because of the team she has around her. "You are only as good as the people you surround yourself with. When everyone is working towards the same goal, success is inevitable," she added.

Charran Fisher also devotes a lot of her time volunteering. She sits on the board of The Boys and Girls Club of Worcester, The Black Economic Council of MA, The Associated Sub-contractors of MA legislative board, as well as an advisory board for Worcester-based EforAll.



Charran Fisher

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We've been proudly supporting our communities since 1850, and now we're taking that support to Polar Park's center field. As one of the 21 Founding Partners of the WooSox, we are eagerly counting down to Opening Day. In carrying on our commitment to Worcester, we'll be actively working with the WooSox, local businesses, and the greater community to continue fostering your home team spirit. Exciting things are coming!

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OPED - Will Wormtown Be the First in a Wave of Local 'Brewstilleries'?

By Sarah Connell Sanders

WORCESTER - Wormtown is the first local brewery to hop on the nationwide trend of diversifying operations with the addition of distilling. While others, like Greater Good Imperial Brewing Company, have introduced hard seltzers to their repertoires under existing licensure, distilling requires a barrage of federal and state approvals. Wormtown's Managing Partner David Fields says the pandemic has given his team time to "find new avenues" and face a challenging chapter head-on.

Preliminary data from the American Craft Spirits Association shows active craft distillers in the U.S. grew 10.7% in 2020 whereas the Brewers Association reported a 2% drop in beer volume sales in 2019 and only 9.1% growth in the number of craft breweries from 2018 to 2019. The intersection between brewing and distilling is a natural one, not to mention, a means for reducing waste. Imperfect batches of beer can be distilled into whiskey, Fields' favorite spirit. Furthermore, whiskey barrels can be repurposed for aging beer.

Many popular craft breweries have already dipped their toes into the still. Dogfish Head began distilling in 2002, followed by giants like Rogue, 3 Floysds, Anchor, and Ballast Point. Both processes require a mastery of fermentation science; however, the distilling space is recognized as its

own art form entirely. "Logistically, brewstilleries make a lot of sense," said Redemption Rock Brewing Company CEO Dani Babineau. "It's a related process and distilling allows breweries to reach a wider audience; not to mention there's a higher price point with spirits than with beer." Babineau's brand and business direction depend on the interests and drive of her employees. "We would consider distilling if we had someone on our team who was really passionate and excited about taking ownership of it, but right now that's not the case," she explained.

By contrast, at Wormtown, Fields observed, "The team is energized to kick off a distilling project, and quite frankly, we drink a lot of bourbon and whiskey." It doesn't hurt that fellow founder Ben Roesch and longest-tenured "Brew Crew" member Ben Pratt both come from distilling backgrounds.

Fields sees the new venture as an opportunity for physical expansion of Wormtown as much as brand expansion. Wormtown will soon take over a 120-seat space adjacent to the brewery's existing footprint. Fields has watched the evolution of small operations like Tree House and Stone Cow as they transformed into experiential destinations - he has long thought about how an urban brewery could do the same. In a catastrophic year for small businesses, Wormtown has its sights set on creating an



Photo Credit: Mike Hendrickson
Sarah Connell Sanders conducts an interview at Wormtown Brewery on Shrewsbury Street in Worcester.

intimate new space and endearing itself to the cocktail crowd, not to mention claiming the title of "Official Hometown Brewery" for the inaugural Worcester Red Sox season.

Stay-at-home orders and quarantine measures have led to a steep rise in alcohol consumption over the last year while revealing Massachusetts' affinity for spirits. According to state surveillance reports, per capita sales of beer were down 12% in March 2020 compared to the prior 3-year March average, while spirits rose by 5.6%. By that logic alone, brewstilleries make business sense.

Fields has never been afraid of growth or change. "Quite frankly, in 2015, when we opened on Shrewsbury Street, we were the only brewery taproom within 20 miles," Fields recalled. "Fast forward five years and there's 15 in our 10-mile radius."

One such newcomer is Greater

Good, the high-alcohol brewery that opened a taproom on Millbrook Street in 2017. "We have no plans to distill currently," said Brand Manager J. T. Ethier. "Our brewpub license allows us to sell a full drink menu as well as beer, something that farmer-brewers can't legally do." By expanding production to include an 8% alcohol seltzer, Greater Good has found a means for attracting the cocktail crowd with original seltzer cocktails.

For diehards, Central Massachusetts has become a stop along the way to the Vermont beer trail, which many consider the pinnacle of craft beer culture. As capacity and travel restrictions loosen in the Northeast, breweries will be in stiff competition with one another to set themselves apart. Diversifying operations is a natural step for Wormtown and if history is any indication, others will soon follow.



WACHUSETT CHAMBER - Pandemic Unveils New Valuable Tools

Over the past year, Chamber members have adapted their businesses to meet the challenges of a pandemic. So too has the Wachusett Area Chamber of Commerce. A community Chamber that thrives on social engagement between members is now focused on being a resource, sharing information on COVID-19, state regulations, and opportunities for funding. The Chamber is also a resource for the community at large, promoting the wealth of services offered by members as a reminder to shop locally.

The food and beverage industry has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. To increase local support, the Chamber is spotlighting a member "Restaurant/Coffee Shop/Brewery of the Week." The campaign has gained traction through email blasts, website visibility and increasing "shares" on

social media. Readers and friends are showing support by dining in, taking out, ordering delivery or simply purchasing a gift card.

The Wachusett Area Chamber Business Directory is another valuable tool. The annual directory features all Wachusett Area Chamber of Commerce member businesses, listed by type of business and alphabetically. Also included are town government contacts, a month-at-a-glance appointment calendar, and supporting member ads. The spiral bound book is distributed free of charge to residents in the Wachusett area. An online version is found on the Chamber's website: www.wachusettareachamber.org.

Scholarship Program

Thanks to support from the business community, the Wachusett Area Chamber of Commerce will offer up

to two \$2,500 scholarships this year to qualified graduating seniors living in the Wachusett area.

Applicants must be planning to pursue business studies as full-time students at a two-year or four-year college and reside in one of the Chamber's service area towns, which include: Boylston, Holden, Paxton, Princeton, Rutland, Sterling and West Boylston. Applicants with exceptional community service may also be considered for the Brian R. Forts Memorial Scholarship, which comes with an additional award.

The Chamber will host events throughout the year to fund this program, including the Scholarship Scramble golf tournament scheduled for Monday, May 24 at Kettle Brook Golf Club in Paxton. The scholarship application is available on the Wachusett Area Chamber of

Commerce website: www.wachusettareachamber.org. The deadline to apply is April 30.

Virtual Events

The Chamber is hosting virtual events each month to help members connect during these challenging times. Informal Chamber Chats allow for free-flowing conversation between members. These morning sessions provide an opportunity to share ideas and concerns. The virtual Business After Hours allows a sponsor to provide a short presentation on a topic of interest, followed by member introductions and updates. To register for upcoming events, visit www.wachusettareachamber.org.

When it is safe to do so, the Chamber looks forward to returning to in-person events and continuing to build business connections within the Wachusett area.

AUBURN CHAMBER - The New Normal in a Covid-19 Era

FLASHBACK: March 10, 2020 Massachusetts entered a statewide shut down as the COVID pandemic set in, as did other states in the country. By March 23 all non-essential businesses were closed. In April the closure of businesses was extended, and we have not seen a full reopening of all businesses since. In May of 2020 we saw the first plan of reopening in 4 phases: Start, Cautious, Vigilant and New Normal. As of December 21, 2020 we are in Phase III, step 1, the Vigilant phase.

CURRENTLY: As of Monday, February 8, 2021 business are opened, with the capacity of 40%. This limit of 40% does differ for certain industries. Restaurants and other personal services, do not have to include their employees in the 40% capacity limit, however gyms, and retailers must include employees in their 40% capacity count. To help our members shift through all the new mandates the Chamber is

updating its members through emails.

LOOKING FORWARD: In December, vaccines made it to the Commonwealth, and there are three phases of distribution, with the third phase to open to the general public in April 2021. Your essential workers, elderly over 65, grocery store workers, manufacturing and other industries to have already been vaccinated by then, there is a question that remains, "Will you feel safe to go out when Massachusetts enters the New Normal phase due to start May 2021?"

Some businesses do not feel that once guidelines are lifted, and vaccines distributed, that they will see their clientele return just as quickly as they were forced to retreat. Businesses are hearing people will still be afraid to venture out, some people have not gone out since March 2020, other than to go to the grocery store or get gas for their car. With online shopping from groceries, clothing

and other must have items in 2021, some folks will continue to live through their computers and mobile devices. How can we penetrate this demographic now? Initially a temporary demographic that was formed out of necessity; comforting for some while at the same time being restricting and stressful for others.

Looking forward there will be new consumers that have entered into the economy, job market, housing market, etc. for the first time that had not known what your pre-pandemic business was. So what can businesses do to bring back the consumers? It is a question we are putting up on the Auburn Chamber's webpage www.auburnchamberma.org. Please visit and give us your feedback. The post pandemic economy is an untapped resource, let's get in on the ground floor and create an atmosphere where the public will feel safe as we enter into the final phase: New Normal.

BLACKSTONE VALLEY CHAMBER - What Will the New Year Bring?

Just about this time last year we were happily welcoming a new decade. The majority of businesses were in a pretty good place. I know the BVCC had experienced a record year in 2019. Actually, the best in our forty-year history. Chambers for the most part were thriving. We were enjoying prosperity with ambitious plans for expansion. No one could have predicted what was to come.

The impact of COVID-19 was devastating on so many levels, compounded with the election chaos, it fatigued our lives and businesses. Can we even accurately imagine life after COVID? Everyone is struggling with the stress of various changes taking place, as well as the accelerated pace of this change. Is it possible to make predictions and strategic decisions for the year ahead when the future appears so uncertain?

I have heard the phrase, "the world has gone crazy". And honestly it seems that way. It is as if we are traveling on a runaway train. What happens when that train comes to an abrupt stop? Will these changes morph into permanent practices? How will we factor change into business and life plans?

We can take a look at some of the ways this forced change has affected business. A select group of compa-

nies are prospering despite - or in some cases because of - the pandemic. Essential businesses open when many other retailers were not, were in the right position to capitalize on shifting purchasing patterns. As the pandemic killed services that required face-to-face contact, those who adapted to the forced change reshaped the marketplace.

The rise of some companies, and the fall of others, comes as the economy struggles to recover from the record decline in economic activity over the spring. The global effect of COVID has altered spending, saving and investing patterns.

"It's very Darwinian," said Beth Ann Bovino, chief U.S. economist for S&P Global. "It's survival of the fittest and, oftentimes, the survival of the biggest." This is unfortunate, and we can certainly see examples all around us. Small business has suffered greatly. Even with opportunities of PPP and other SBA funding, some smaller businesses just couldn't make it. If these changes become permanent, would these businesses have thrived?

In March, President Trump called the shutdown "just a temporary moment of time." Three weeks later the first Paycheck Protection Program was announced. It was supposed to be

a financial bridge to get small businesses over what was then thought to be an eight-week hump. Now, three PPP's later, what initially seemed like an economic pause, has transformed into a complete makeover.

It appears that the pandemic is responsible for a correction of sorts. Online and no contact cashless payments could take over currency. Experts are scrambling to discern which changes are temporary and which are permanent. As the workforce has increasingly and successfully become remote from home, we have seen high end clothing stores specializing in business wear slide into bankruptcy, while manufacturers of casual wear prosper. This shift may not only affect commuting patterns but also cause many to permanently leave the cities for more rural areas, boosting the residential market, but damaging the commercial real estate market.

When the nonessential businesses shut down in March, it was widely accepted to be just a brief interruption allowing us to get control of the pandemic before resuming back to normal. Will the emerging new normal mean less money spent on air travel and more on stay-at-home comforts? What will that trickle down effect be?

Commercial airline maker Boeing

and engine manufacturer General Electric are already experiencing disappointing earnings. And these industries are not the only ones trying to make predictions in order to adapt to a "new normal". Permanent job loss translates into higher unemployment assistance. In order to attack this burden on our state budget, development of vocational programs for retraining the suddenly unemployed, like the opportunities offered through the Blackstone Valley Education Hub, will become more and more essential.

Adaptability and flexibility is the key to success for business to flourish in the brave new world that will be born from the effects of the pandemic. That goes for Chambers of Commerce, too. We will need to be resourceful and develop innovative programs that provide services to benefit and meet the now different needs of growing industries who prevail. Collaboration is essential in order to reimagine our practices and maximize productivity.

It's a New Year, and with it comes the opportunity to change our mindset and attitude.

Let's embrace change and welcome the "new normal", whatever it may be.
- By Jeannie Hebert, president and CEO, Blackstone Valley Chamber.



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WORCESTER REGIONAL FOOD HUB - Unique Café Just Opened and Still Has Big Plans

By David Sullivan

WORCESTER - Looking for the best Jamaican food in town? Unique Café is the one you're looking for. As the founder and owner of Unique Café, a Jamaican restaurant at 79 Millbury St., Nadine James has impressively grown her business from a fledgling startup to a brick-and-mortar business over the course of the pandemic.

Ms. James, who was born in Jamaica as the youngest of 12 siblings, says that she started to cook at nine years old as a way to help others. "The thing that inspired me about food is that I see the importance of food in drawing people together," says Ms. James. "When my mom used to cook, all her friends would come and they would talk about life...I've always wanted to cook because of that."

As a participant of the Launching Diverse Food Entrepreneurs in Worcester program that the Worcester Regional Food Hub hosted in summer 2019, Ms. James took her passion and turned it into a startup business. After the summer-long program, she partnered with the Food Hub to run pop-up events that helped her get the revenue to buy a restaurant.

Shon Rainford, director of the Food Hub, had nothing but positive words for his former mentee. "Nadine had a vision from the first day, and now



Nadine James (left) and her two daughters who help her run the business, Khaaliyah Watson (middle) and Kayanna James (right).

it has come to reality. I could not be more proud of her tenacity and hard work," he says. "I was blown away by her fried crab, both the taste and presentation. Her fried chicken is top notch as are her signature juices. Once the word is out, she is sure to

have a very successful business primarily due to her drive, but also with the support provided by the Food Hub, Chamber, and the city's Office of Economic Development."

"It helped tremendously," said Ms. James when asked how the Food Hub helped her start Unique Café. "Shon brought in people to explain taxes and finances, to teach you how to make your menu, every little thing I needed then."

While the pandemic stopped Unique Café from doing pop-up events hosted by the Food Hub, which it normally does for its member businesses, that was not going to stop Ms. James from pursuing her dream and helping others.

At the start of the pandemic, she joined CoCaSha (Connect, Care, Share), a company founded by a Harvard graduate that pays minority women business owners for teaching culturally-minded cooking classes online.

Ms. James used the pay from her instructor work to save up for buying a space to house Unique Café.

She also volunteered as a manager for a friend who owns Akra Eatery & Juice Bar, a West African restaurant that operates out of the Worcester Public Market in Kelley Square. "This passion of mine was not going away," she says.

This instructor and volunteer experience were essential for Ms. James in preparing to start her business.

All of her patience paid off in February when Unique Café had its soft opening at the plaza at 79 Millbury St. "You can come here and get a smoothie, get freshly squeezed juice, and most Jamaican restaurants don't do those," says Ms. James. Combining this American juice bar experience with traditional Jamaican entrees such as oxtail, goat, curry chicken, plantains, jerk chicken salad and more is what makes Unique Café so...unique.

"I of course get my fruits and vegetables from the Food Hub," she notes,



also saying that she prioritizes buying products from neighborhoods stores and that she is in the process of trying to source her meat from local farms with the help of the Food Hub.

Nadine isn't satisfied yet, though. She says the plan for Unique Café's future involves buying another property on the plaza where she is located and using it to house a classy restaurant adjacent to her current juice bar property. "So while you wait for a seat over there you can still drink your smoothie or juice here and when your number is called, you come and get your nice intimate wine and dine," Ms. James explains. The hope is to one day open multiple Unique Café locations like this.

And next month, she is planning to start a series of livestreams on Instagram where she and guest doctors will explain the benefits of healthy fresh juices and smoothies using a live Q+A format.

"I'm an entrepreneur and when I see stuff, I see the future and not what I'm going through right now," she adds, noting the opening of Polar Park a couple blocks away from her restaurant. She says this forward thinking allowed her to persevere during the pandemic and recognize that the ballpark district would create conditions where restaurants like hers could seriously thrive.

Ms. James runs Unique Café with her family, and says it is an intimate but safe setting in the restaurant. They currently have a Facebook (@UniqueCafe) and Instagram page (@UniqueCafeMA) and are available for pickup if you call them at 508-340-3381. They are open from Tuesday to Saturday, 10 am to 7 pm. "Just come and check it out!" says Ms. James.

Unique Café has healthy, authentic Jamaican food with some American twists.

- David Sullivan is Economic Development Fellow for the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

LEGAL MATTERS - Newest Stimulus Bill Helps Small Businesses

Since the inauguration of President Biden and Vice President Harris, lawmakers have been diligently working on the latest stimulus bill, The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. In an effort to deliver financial relief to struggling families and ramp up vaccination distribution across the country, The House of Representatives passed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan on the last day of February. The bill now goes to the Senate, which will try to move this bill quickly in hopes of getting it to the President's desk before March 14, when the current unemployment aid programs are set to expire.

So, what is in the American Rescue Plan?

The bill, which largely follows the economic stimulus plan President Biden unveiled in January, includes funding for vaccine production and distribution, another round of stimulus payments for many households, an extension of federal unemployment benefits and more.

Stimulus payments: The bill provides funding for a third economic impact payment, worth up to \$1,400 per individual and dependent.

This time around, individuals earning an adjusted gross income (AGI) up to \$75,000 (and married couples earning up to \$150,000) will receive \$1,400 each, plus \$1,400 for each dependent. Unlike previous stimulus payments, adult dependents qualify for this round. That means many college students, disabled adults and elderly Americans will receive a check for the first time.

The payments phase out gradually, hitting \$0 for individuals earning an AGI over \$100,000 per year and couples earning over \$200,000 per year. The payments are based on either 2019 or 2020 income, depending on when a taxpayer files their 2020 tax return.

Unemployment Assistance: The bill also extends unemployment programs past their current March 14 expiration date through Aug. 29. In addition to extending benefits for gig workers and others who did not qualify for benefits before the pandemic, it also boosts the enhanced federal payments from an extra \$300 per week to \$400 per week.

Small Business Assistance: The American Rescue Plan Act also contains a number of provisions for small businesses. It allocates an additional \$7.25 billion for Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) forgivable loans but otherwise relies more on targeted grants to small businesses in sectors of the economy hardest hit by pandemic-related economic slowdowns.

Specifically, the bill provides: \$15 billion for targeted Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) advance payments; \$25 billion for restaurants, bars, and other eligible providers of food and drink; \$1.25 billion for shuttered venue operators; \$175 million to create a "community navigator" pilot program to increase awareness of and participation in COVID-19 relief programs for business owners currently lacking access, with priority for businesses owned by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals, women, and veterans.

The bill also allocates \$15 billion in grant money to the airline industry, with \$14 billion for eligible air carriers and \$1 billion for eligible contractors. An additional \$8 billion is provided for airports.

PPP funding: The program has disbursed more than \$662 billion in forgivable loans in three iterations over the past 11 months. But with about half of the \$284 billion in current funding available, the American Rescue Plan Act appropriates just \$7.25 billion in additional funding and does not extend the PPP's current application period, which is scheduled to close March 31.

Support for restaurants: Restaurants and bars have been among the businesses hardest hit by the stay-at-home and social-distancing restrictions imposed to slow the spread of COVID-19. The \$25 billion Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF) is intended to help businesses in the food services sector.

In addition to restaurants and bars, other entities eligible for support from the RRF include food stands, food trucks, food carts, caterers, saloons, inns, taverns, lounges, brewpubs, tasting rooms, taprooms, and any licensed facility or premise of a beverage alcohol producer where the public may taste, sample, or

purchase products, or other similar place of business in which the public or patrons assemble for the primary purpose of being served food or drink.

The act allows for grants equal to the pandemic-related revenue loss of the eligible entity, up to \$10 million per entity, or \$5 million per physical location. The grants are calculated by subtracting 2020 revenue from 2019 revenue. Entities are limited to 20 locations.

The grant funds may be used to pay for the following eligible expenses: Payroll costs, principal and interest payments on a mortgage, rent payments, utilities, maintenance expenses including construction to accommodate outdoor seating and walls, floods, deck surfaces, furniture, fixtures, and equipment; supplies including personal protective equipment and cleaning materials, food and beverage expenses, covered supplier costs, operational expenses, paid sick leave, and any other expenses the SBA determines to be essential to maintaining the eligible entity.

During the first 21 days of the grants, the SBA will prioritize applications from restaurants owned and operated or controlled by women, veterans, or socially and economically disadvantaged individuals.

While this is a 30,000-foot overview of the bill as it stands just a few days



Alex Guardiola

after being passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, it seems as if there is a proverbial light at the end of this economic and health crisis tunnel. Our businesses are slowly reopening, our positive COVID case numbers are trending in the right direction, and the vaccines are being rolled out at a steady pace and will accelerate as we begin to add a third vaccine to the distribution. While this bill does not have unanimous support in either the House or the Senate, it seems imminent and will help our most vulnerable survive this crisis. It is time to get back to some sort of normalcy.

- Alex Guardiola is Director of Government Affairs and Public Policy at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce



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RETIREMENT - Assumption Welcomes Worcester's Seniors to WISE Up

By Sarah Connell Sanders

WORCESTER - The Worcester Institute for Senior Education (WISE) hosted by Assumption University makes it easy for lifelong learners to stay engaged with 30 rotating courses. Offerings range from uplifting to mysterious with unique selections like "Great Movie Music," "Introduction to Bird Watching," and "Imposters, Con Artists and Their Webs of Deception." Assumption President Dr. Francesco C. Cesareo says religion and politics courses have become the most popular programs in recent years, adding that WISE has grown a great deal since its inception in 1992.

"WISE began with a small group of individuals who were about to retire," Cesareo explains. "They were wondering what the next chapter in their lives would be like." He credits the leadership of Maddie Levine and Shirley Weinstein who sought the assistance of Assumption's former Dean of Continuing Education, Charlene Martin. Martin agreed to organize an open house, anticipating a small turnout.

"They didn't know how many people would show up," recalls Cesareo, "Maybe a handful - maybe 20." Martin was shocked when 300 people arrived at Assumption to learn more about opportunities for senior peer-to-peer education. The initial gathering demonstrated a powerful need in the community. Organizers began recruiting former professors, attorneys, and the like to develop a curriculum for older adult learners. WISE was gaining momentum, fast.

Seniors on Campus and Abroad

In 1993, WISE signed an official site agreement with Assumption, distinguishing their status as an independent autonomous entity. Soon, senior citizens began turning up in the dining hall and the library. Assumption immediately recognized the positive impact WISE was having on its campus culture. WISE members began traveling together to far-off destinations like Israel, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Membership skyrocketed to over 400 "older adults" in the first two decades of WISE's existence.



A look back through the WISE Facebook page reveals smiling seniors hiking together on New England trails, trips to historic landmarks, brown bag lectures, ball games, and outings to the Worcester Art Museum's annual 'Flora in Winter' event.



Cesareo believes WISE speaks directly to Assumption's mission for undergraduates by demonstrating learning as a lifelong process. He says, "Our undergraduates get to witness that learning does not end once you get your degree and go out into the world; learning is constantly taking place throughout your life." Cesareo especially enjoys seeing WISE members participate in guest lectures, band performances, and theater productions at the university. "It's really an exchange between

generations," he concludes.

Programming in a Pandemic

Enthusiastic participants were not deterred when COVID-19 pushed WISE into the virtual learning space. On the contrary, Zoom classes made it possible for seniors to work remotely from wherever they might be quarantining. Students are currently enrolled from as far away as Washington State and the Caribbean.

Organizers continue to encourage enrollment with the moniker, "Join us wherever you are, wearing whatever you're wearing." Still, WISE members are eager to get back into the lecture halls of Assumption as soon as possible.

Look back through the WISE Facebook page for a taste of normalcy. Photos reveal smiling seniors hiking together on New England trails, trips to historic landmarks, brown bag lectures, and outings to the Worcester Art Museum's annual 'Flora in Winter' event. The feed is flush with interesting articles from The New Yorker and Smithsonian Magazine, and even an invitation to a virtual night in "The City of Lights" - Paris. WISE is a model of perseverance.

Growing WISE

For Assumption, generational diversity is only the beginning. Along with Vice President Conway Campbell, Cesareo is pushing a diversity initiative within WISE to better reflect the demographics of Worcester. WISE's Diversity Initiative aims to achieve the following goals, "To give opportunities to members of other cultures, minority groups, religions and genders to participate in WISE membership, including leadership positions" and "to break barriers of communication among members of different communities and learn about the rich culture of diverse populations." Campbell is in the process of meeting with a variety of community leaders in hopes that WISE continues to grow as a welcoming resource for seniors of all identities from every corner of the city.

Not sure if you qualify for WISE? The term "senior" is self-defined. Members are free to enroll in as many courses as they'd like. Spring memberships start at \$165 with a limited number of scholarships available by request. Members can upgrade to a full-year membership for an additional \$100. WISE also facilitates movie and book clubs, along with a number of special interest groups (SIG) like 'Environmental SIG' and 'Supreme Court SIG.' Visit www.assumption-wise.org to browse spring course offerings and learn more about what WISE can do for you.

Community Bank Supports Small Businesses

By Karen Pelletier

On Feb. 4, Country Bank announced a new partnership with the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce to provide memberships to small businesses. The new scholarship was announced on the Chamber's daily radio blast on WCRN 830, with host Hank Stoltz. Senior Vice President of Marketing and Public Relations, Shelley Regin, joined Chamber president and CEO, Tim Murray on the show.

Country Bank is a full-service mutual community bank serving central and western Massachusetts with 14 offices in Ware, Palmer, West Brookfield, Brimfield, Belchertown, Wilbraham, Ludlow, Leicester, Paxton, Charlton, and Worcester. Country Bank has been a strong supporter

of the Worcester Chamber, sponsoring events, participating on the board and committees and attending programs. They recognize the value of their own membership and the benefits the Chamber offers small businesses.

This new scholarship provides access to the Chamber for members who might not have the finances to renew or join the Chamber due to the pandemic.

"Throughout the pandemic, many small businesses have had to find ways to reduce expenses; some of those reductions included canceling their Chamber membership. To align with our ongoing mission to help small businesses thrive, the establishment of this scholarship program will help struggling businesses remain a

Chamber member, as well as provide others an opportunity to become new members. As a long-time member of the Chamber, our staff has had the opportunity to benefit from the valuable programs and events that the Chamber offers; we feel this membership offers a vital connection to growing and supporting businesses within the city," said Shelley Regin.

The scholarship was an idea born from Regin and Paul Scully, president and CEO of Country Bank, discussing how they can best help small businesses stay open during this economic crisis. They recognized that the Chamber is the best lifeline for many businesses—sharing critical information on legislation, regulations and safety with members.

The Chamber also works 1-1 with

small businesses to help address their specific needs and questions.

The scholarship application is available on the Chamber's website www.worcesterchamber.org. Applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis and awards for full-year memberships will be awarded to small businesses within the city.

"We are grateful to Country Bank for helping our Central Massachusetts area businesses at such a critical time. This program will allow the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce to continue to provide services and advocacy to these eligible businesses during this health and economic crisis," stated Timothy Murray, President and CEO of the Chamber.



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DEVELOPMENT, FROM PAGE 1

Working with the city of Worcester, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Red Sox organization, and “all the powers that be,” Mr. Dowdle’s company came to this master deal to develop the ballpark district.

Since the initial game plan was unveiled, things have changed due to the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic. However, Mr. Dowdle said “all along” Madison Properties had “built some flexibility into the master plan to allow for change” and “tried to diversify the types of buildings” in order to create balance.

As of late February, here’s where their plans and progress stands. Right now, the company is putting a multi-story office building outside of left field with a below grade parking garage. They’ll wait to do the rest of the vertical construction on the office building until there’s more tenant interest so they can respond appropriately to market demand.

Across the street, they hope to break ground on their first of two planned residential buildings during the first half of this year. The building will consist of 228 market-rate apartment units and street-level retail space. It will run from the corner of Madison and Washington streets to the corner of Madison and Green Island Boulevard. As far as the second proposed housing development (potentially 125 units) goes, Mr. Dowdle said they don’t have any immediate plans to start construction on that and will wait to see how the first residential building comes along before progressing.

On the other side of Green Island Boulevard, the developer originally contemplated two hotels in one

building – one would be a boutique, and the other more of a limited service hotel. Now, Mr. Dowdle said they’re envisioning two hotels in two separate buildings and are waiting for the hospitality industry to bounce back following the pandemic’s devastation before they talk about bringing on another hotel in Worcester. Construction on the first hotel is “not imminent,” Mr. Dowdle said, but “we still think, long term, it’s a good hotel site.” He added the site for the second hotel could take on different forms as well, depending on what market demand is for commercial building use.

Behind the hotel sites, construction is currently underway on a 340-space parking garage being built by the city and leased to Madison. It should be complete by this fall.

Lastly, between that garage and the new Green Island Boulevard, Madison Properties is actively seeking tenants for their proposed life sciences building. Mr. Dowdle said they’re particularly excited about this development “because we think the Worcester life science economy is growing and there’s more need for lab space. So we think we’ve got an interesting building footprint that can accommodate a lot of different life science tenants.”

When asked about a total, “all said and done” cost of investment on these mixed-use developments, Mr. Dowdle said the company hadn’t yet tabulated one and preferred to look at it on a project-by-project basis because the situation is fluid. According to application materials filed with the city and state, the company’s first phase is estimated to be \$89 million.

BOSTON CAPITAL

Before the brand new ballpark could even open, it had already caught the eye of others like Boston Capital. In January, the Boston firm’s development arm formally announced its plans to acquire the Table Talk Pies site on Washington Street and turn it into a mix of residential and retail space. Table Talk Pies is moving headquarters and factory out of Kelley Square to the South Worcester Industrial Park area.

Though still in the early stages of formulating a master plan, Boston Capital has said its development will eventually include a mix of affordable, workforce, and market-rate housing, as well as retail space.

Construction on phase one of development could start in 2022. That will be a six-story, 80,000 sq. ft., 80-unit building consisting of one, two, and three bedrooms, which will all be affordable housing. Boston Capital Development won’t only be transforming the roughly four-acre plot into housing and retail; it is also establishing a pedestrian connection from Green Street to Polar Park by re-instituting Spruce Street.

According to Rich Mazzocchi, managing director for Boston Capital Development, the company’s initial attraction to Worcester came simply from looking at it as the second largest city in New England and from seeing all the momentum with recent public and private investments. But, the company was also responding to what they identified as a “severe shortage” of housing in many communities across the Commonwealth and particularly in Worcester – the focal point of the Chamber’s 2019 “Worcester for Everyone” regional housing and economic study.

“We saw an opportunity to play a part in creating more affordable housing and this particular site really lends itself to mixed income and mixed use,” Mr. Mazzocchi said. “So, we expanded upon our original development plan, which may have just included affordable housing had it been a smaller site within the city.”

For the project’s architect, Dan Benoit of Benoit Design Group and formerly of the city of Worcester’s development office, the opportunity to do new construction on a large block of land downtown is rewarding. “Just the opportunity to reshape this section of the city, doing what we’re doing with adding the street and really changing the skyline [...] it’s been a great opportunity all around,” Mr. Benoit said.

He added that Boston Capital’s plan to save the original Table Talk Pies building is gratifying, too, because he gets to be a part of efforts to preserve a piece of Worcester history while also looking forward to the future and helping redefine that area of the city.

At the time of writing, Mr. Mazzocchi wasn’t able to provide an approximate total investment on the development project, as they were still in the early planning stages. The first phase is estimated to be around \$36 million, and he expects Boston Capital’s projects to “be multiple phases over several years of development.”

CHURCHILL JAMES

Similar to Boston Capital, Polar Park served as the main catalyst for Churchill James’ decision to develop in the area, but not the only reason.

With their office based in Worcester, Partner Thomas Keane said the company had been “circling the wagons on buying some commercial real

estate in Worcester for a long time,” and the announcement of the ballpark was “just a way to kick us in the right direction and kind of land on a neighborhood.”

Churchill James’ mixed-use development projects on Green Street consist of residential, retail, commercial, and office plans. Because they own part of a bowling franchise, they’ll be bringing candlepin bowling back to its place of origin with a 12,000 sq. ft. bowling alley and a flatbread pizza restaurant. On top of that, there will be 20,000 sq. ft. of retail and restaurant space available. Mr. Keane anticipates about 3,000 sq. ft. of office or other commercial use space, as well as some interior parking.

Though Churchill James’ initial goal was to deliver 60 to 80 units of housing, they’ve added to the scale of their residential building, now aiming to create between 200 and 300 studios, and one and two bedroom apartments. An expected 60% of the units, and some amenities decks, will overlook the ballpark.

Mr. Keane also cited the Chamber’s 2019 housing study as a key factor in the company’s decision to increase the size of their residential building. He stressed that, while Churchill James “wouldn’t be here without the park,” when it comes to the sheer scale of their development, after looking at the housing study extensively with their development partners and consultants, they thought the area could bear a lot more housing. “That’s really what pushed us to make the project bigger,” he said.

Moreover, Mr. Keane pointed to other projects in the city including Allen Fletcher’s Kelley Square Lofts, 145 Front Street, and the Courthouse Lofts as proof of the demand for housing in Worcester and evidence of success.

Churchill James expects to break ground in early 2022. Things will fluctuate, but as of now, they estimate a total investment of \$110 million.

COMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY

Although their projects vary in use, size, and cost, there is one thing all the developers have in common: they’re all working in the Canal District and Green Island neighborhood with the vision of adding to and complementing the neighborhood’s vibrant culture – not altering it.

Having sat in on enough of the meetings between the city and Red Sox executives before the team officially decided on a move, Mr. Dowdle said, “I can 100% assure you that the vibrance of the Canal District was a huge factor” in their decision-making process. “The team and the club and the ballpark were not going to need to create a neighborhood; they were fitting into a neighborhood.”

The concept served as a guiding principle while the stakeholders spent a year-plus developing the master plan. Mr. Dowdle said, “The thought process” behind this development happening was “to fit in and complement the district – not compete or be independent from the district.”

Altogether, the hundreds of new housing units being planned mean possibly more than a thousand new people could be calling the Canal District “home.” With more people living in the area; more people working in the area at newly-developed offices and life science labs; and more people visiting the area for new restaurant, retail, and entertainment opportunities; the goal is to expand on the neighborhood’s walkability and density while adding to the support for existing businesses and the local economy.

INDUSTRY - WorcShop Moves to Rochdale, Now Largest Makerspace

By David Sullivan

The WorcShop is looking to strike while the iron is hot. The local industrial makerspace and business incubator recently moved to a 52,000 square foot former factory in Rochdale and is looking to get the word out about its successes.

While previously located on Stafford Street in Worcester since 2016, WorcShop found an opportunity this past year to move to an even bigger industrial space just across the border in the town of Leicester, right at a time when manufacturing and business incubation has become a critical facet of the economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The move makes WorcShop the largest industrial makerspace on the East Coast and second largest in the country.

Co-founders and owners Angela and Randal Meraki, along with business partner Scott Graves, founder of the public relations company SMGraves Associates, spoke with the Chamber during our 360 Pivot Facebook Live in January.

“We have a complete complement of just about all industries being represented,” said Randal, who noted the WorcShop specializes in all industrial arts and manufacturing fields,



Angela Meraki (left), Randal Meraki (second to left), and Scott Graves (second to right) are interviewed by the Chamber’s Virginia Murphy in the Facebook Live 360 Pivot at the WorcShop.

including blacksmithing, 3D printing, auto repair, metal fabrication, textiles, plastic forming, and more.

A wide range of classes are available for members of the public to register for at the WorcShop. However, these classes are temporarily on hold until the spring while the building has work done. For members of the WorcShop, businesses not only have 24-hour access to the high-tech professional equipment such as CNC

mills, SolidWorks-enabled computers, spray paint guns, a blacksmithing forge, a metrology lab, industrial band saws, plasma cutters, and more – they also have access to business training and courses on leadership.

In providing all the equipment and training for new industrial arts businesses, WorcShop helps enable the incubation of a critical industry at a time when manufacturing jobs are needed most. Manufacturing

job replacements in Massachusetts alone are expected to reach 96,000 next year due to the rising number of retirees and stagnant number of vocational jobs being filled by young people.

Scott mentioned the importance of this incubator, saying, “This facility, an intensely comprehensive makerspace, is now a full-service business incubator.” Finances, HR, strategy, leadership, and management are all courses taught by the WorcShop to help manufacturing and industrial arts businesses get off the ground.

The WorcShop is a for-profit company actively looking for investors to help realize its vision of an incubator community built around the former Worcester Tool and Stamping Company factory, where they now reside. In achieving this mission, they have already gotten support and funding from the state through MassDevelopment and Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

You can find out more about the WorcShop, its membership, and public classes in blacksmithing, metal fabrication, SolidWorks, and more at WorcShop.com.

- David Sullivan is Economic Development Fellow for the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce

Guide Published for all Voke Tech Programs

By David Sullivan

With a shrinking workforce due to a growing retirement-age population and due to the pandemic costing Americans 22 million jobs in the past year, the demand for vocational and trades jobs is massive. Filling these vocational, trade, and professional jobs is crucial in the coming years, and employers are desperate for skilled graduates from vocational technical programs.

Churchill James expects to break ground in early 2022. Things will fluctuate, but as of now, they estimate a total investment of \$110 million.

Filling this “talent gap” is a two-pronged approach: getting more high school students educated in state-approved Chapter 74 vocational programs and getting adult learners retrained and re-skilled through evening classes.

Despite this need, many vocational technical schools face capacity issues due to high levels of students applying to get in. As a result, many families feel discouraged from pursuing vocational technical education for their children. Additionally, some adults feel as though if they did not go to a vocational technical school, they cannot learn new skillsets, trades, or vocations.

One alum of North High School in Worcester who did not take vocational courses, John Shugrue ‘17, says he wished he would have graduated with some experience in trades. “I could have come out of high school on track for something like plumbing or carpentry, even followed it into college, but I felt I lost out...not having any real training for a career.”

While the Chamber works with its partners to advocate for expanding the capacity of these schools across the state, there are plenty of options available for both traditional high school students and adults of all ages in Worcester looking to get certification in a vocation or trade so they can take advantage of a flourishing job

market for these industries. There are educational options other than enrolling in a vocational technical school.

In the Worcester Public Schools (WPS) system, vocational technical education is widely offered. Worcester Technical High School (WTHS) has received national acclaim for its vocational education and offers high-quality courses in almost every vocation and trade. WTHS, like other similar schools, faces capacity issues – they simply do not have space for all the students applying each year.

To address this, WPS has started two state-supported programs: Innovation Pathways and Worcester Night Life. WPS also offers “Career Pathways” through its traditional high schools, which are similar to majoring in a degree in college, except for specific vocational studies.

There is a “three-shift” model to accommodate this programming. First, from 9am-2pm at WPS high schools, students attend their typical classes, including Career Pathways courses. From 2-5pm, students from other WPS schools in Innovation Pathways can take vocational courses at WTHS, called “dual enrollment”. Then from 5-9pm at these schools, adults can pay to take Night Life classes from a catalog of over 800 courses in vocational technical education.

Career Pathways

WPS offers supplemental vocational technical courses called Career Pathways that do not require the student to be enrolled in Innovation Pathways. These courses of study last multiple years, typically starting in 9th grade, and can be taken at Doherty Memorial High School, North High School, and South High Community School.

There are also non-Chapter 74 vocational programs in automotive technology at Burncoat Senior High

School and at South High Community School.

Doherty offers a 3-year Engineering and Technology Academy that teaches civil engineering, 3D modeling software, CNC machine usage, robotics, a senior capstone, and more. At the program’s end, students are prepared to enter the workforce or pursue a collegiate engineering degree.

North High offers a Health Science Academy which introduces students to the healthcare field. Students in this program learn how to care for patients, become familiar with anatomy and physiology and other medical practicum, and are prepared to take the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) exam in their senior year.

North High also offers a Business Technology Program which prepares students for the office workforce by giving them certification in Microsoft Office programs and the QuickBooks accounting software, as well as training them in organizational skills and financial decision-making.

South High offers a Culinary Program, a Diesel Technology Program, and an Early Childhood Program that each begin in the student’s 9th grade year.

The Culinary Program prepares students for entering the food service workforce through learning how to prepare meals and serve customers. The Diesel Program teaches students the ins and outs of diesel engines through hands on experience. The Early Childhood Program introduces students to the intricacies of childcare for children from infancy to 5 years old.

The full list of Career Pathways vocational technical programming at WPS and its online application can be found at <https://worcesterschools.org/academics/career-pathways/>.

Innovation Pathways

Innovation Pathways is designed for public high school students not enrolled at WTHS looking to obtain industry-recognized credentials for a particular vocation or trade.

The program runs from November through mid-March. Busing is provided from each WPS high school to WTHS at 1pm. Students then take courses from 2-5pm. Students also take internships, apprenticeships, and cooperatives which can be paid or unpaid and help prepare them for entering the workforce with hands-on experience.

Applications and more information are available online at <https://worcesterschools.org/academics/career-pathways/innovation-pathways-program/>. The program starts in 9th or 10th grade, with preference given to 9th grade applicants.

Worcester Night Life

Worcester Night Life is educational programming in vocational technical education for adults of all ages. Instructors are professionals working within the field they are teaching, and there are over 800 available courses to register for across all industries.

Not only does Night Life include vocational and trade education, it also includes student loan counseling, medical field certification, software training, marketing courses, fitness trainer certification, and more. These classes are available online during the pandemic. Learners pay a one-time fee that helps keep the program running and the instructors compensated for their time. More information on Night Life programming can be found at <https://worcesternightlife.org/>.

If you have questions for the Chamber about any of these programs, contact Karen Pelletier (kpelletier@worcesterchamber.org / 508-753-2924.

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STARTUP WORCESTER - ACCL Marketing Growth Accelerates

In May 2018, Avyay Chaganty and Cody Lavallee were two wide-eyed, young, enthusiastic college graduates eager to take on the next step in life. That past March, we decided together we would take the leap of faith, forgo a traditional path, and launch our start-up ACCL Marketing.

As it might have been unrealistic to others, both Cody and I had a strong urge for entrepreneurship, dating back to when we first met at Becker College as freshmen. From Cody working with his best friend to assist in the launch of his own clothing company, to Avyay stringing lacrosse sticks on the side for pocket cash, we always knew that we had an eye for business and were always eager for the next endeavour.

When we first launched ACCL, our goal focused on supporting Worcester's Small Business Community through affordable, creative, digital strategy and content creation. After initial success in signing clients, we felt that we needed to extend our network, and needed a way to engage new business owners. This was our first real challenge.

We reached out to our friends Ryan Canuel of Petricore Games and Start-Up Worcester Alumni, and Timothy Loew of MassDigi. They recommended that we look into the StartUp Worcester Program.

After extensive research and consid-



eration, Cody and I both knew that the network and skills we could learn through the Cohort would ultimately help us.

After being selected as a member of the 2019 StartUp Worcester Cohort, our network truly began to expand; we utilized our Chamber Membership to engage in networking events, met with our SCORE mentor to strategize and plan future business steps, and moved our offices to the new co-working space located on Port-

land St in Worcester (WORCLAB).

Things were moving at a much quicker pace, and one by one our goals were starting to be accomplished. Then, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Our community was hit hard and as two young small business owners, we remained optimistic.

Despite the challenges, we pressed onwards and upwards which we credit to the connections we made during our time in Worcester. Looking back as an alumnus of the Start-

Up Worcester program, I encourage every entrepreneur in the city to apply for this program as it is a great networking opportunity and resource for young and emerging entrepreneurs.

This past year has been one of the most challenging times in my life as a business owner, but one thing that I am certain of is that this city sticks together and there is always light at the end of the tunnel. It is clear to me that the opportunities that were provided to us through the StartUp Worcester Program resulted in many of the new relationships and connections that we are confident will only continue to grow down the road. We have remained close to our mentors as well as our fellow cohort members and are excited to assist in helping the next class of young leaders succeed as well.

As an entrepreneur, oftentimes, you feel as if you are all alone. Joining programs such as StartUp Worcester provides you with a sense of community.

ACCL Marketing is a full-service creative marketing agency focused on surpassing business goals and key performance indicators through the art of storytelling and new age media.

To learn more about what we do and to speak with me please reach us at achaganty@acclmarketing.com.

LEADERSHIP WORCESTER - Listening to the Voices in the Back of the Room

By Elena Arranz Alonso

"Where are you from?" Such a simple question, yet very difficult to answer for many of us. Although I grew up in Spain, I have spent the last twelve years in Worcester. When I answer that question, I always respond with "I grew up in Spain, but I am from Worcester." It makes me happy to think that two places I love wholeheartedly can coexist in one sentence.

It has always been easy for me to see the beauty in this city. I find its vibrant art life fascinating. Worcester State University welcomed me with open arms, first as a student, later as an employee. Worcester's food scene is as diverse as its citizenry, mostly driven by entrepreneurs. However, what drew me the most as a newcomer was the community. I have watched softball games and concerts at local parks, attended high school basketball games, taken part in the yearly LGBTQ+ Pride month celebration, and demonstrated in front of city hall for causes I deeply believe in.

When I got accepted into Leadership Worcester in 2019, I did not know what to expect. I already loved this city, what else was there to learn? I quickly understood that Leadership Worcester was not only devoted to showing us the greatness in Worcester, but also to shedding light into the challenges suffered by an evolving city, and to introducing



us to those who are working to tackle these issues. After every session we were asked: "What can you do about it? What will you do about it?" The program encourages you to become an active participant in Worcester's history.

At Worcester State University, I advise non-matriculated and adult students. Most of my advisees are Worcester residents. Their professional and personal lives are affected by what happens in this city and so is their ability to start, continue, or finish their degrees. Leadership Worcester showed me areas of my students' lives I had never been subjected to. We went into local schools and conversed with teachers and principals, we visited non-profits, and talked to community organizers. My cohort had heated discussions about topics such as open green spaces, education, healthcare, and parking. It was in those conversations where I learned the most.

Since starting the program, I have joined our neighborhood association.

I have also volunteered to translate information for parents of English and Second Language students. I have got involved with the Worcester State University LGBTQ+ advisory group, and sexual and relational violence prevention groups. After the opening of Thea's Pantry at Worcester State, I encouraged the Alumni Association Advisory Board in making a drive for essential items. I have marched with my neighbors in demand for justice, and I have voted as a new United States citizen. Since the pandemic hit the city in March, I have connected students with resources I learned of through my Leadership Worcester network. When one of my fellow Leadership Worcester cohort members organized a holiday toy-drive for local families, many of us jumped in to make donations. They are small actions, but Leadership Worcester had shown me that every little contribution can make a difference.

On our closing ceremony for Leadership Worcester we were asked to

express a leadership declaration. In mine, I committed to listening to the voices in the back of the room, taking what they say seriously, and doing my part. My Leadership Worcester cohort taught me an invaluable lesson: always interrogate how you can contribute ("what can you do about it?"), and take action ("what will you do about it?"). Let's not do what is easy, but what is right.

- Elena Arranz Alonso is a Non-Matriculated/ Adult Student Advisor at Worcester State University



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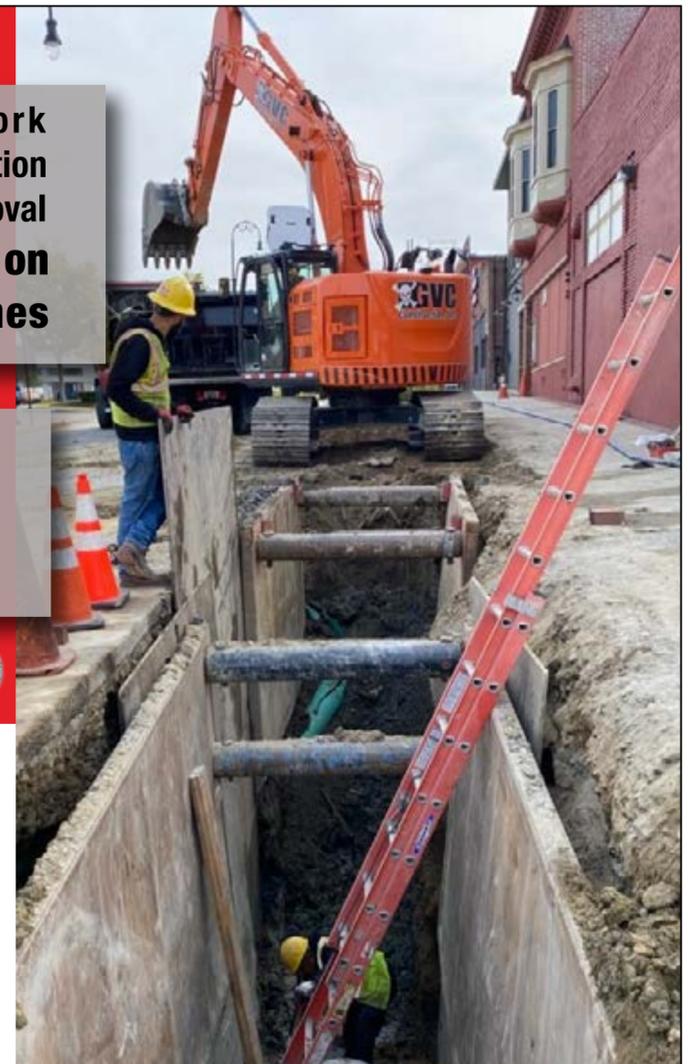
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SPORTS STREET - Brady Wins Again, Fans in Stands Closer To Reality

At time of the publication of this edition of *Chamber Exchange - The Newspaper*; Opening Day at Polar Park will be approximately 30 days away. The recent announcement by Gov. Charlie Baker to allow limited seating at sports venues will mean that fans will be present at Polar Park when the Worcester Red Sox have their inaugural home game. This is no small feat given there was no Triple-A baseball season in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Congratulations to the workers who constructed Polar Park under a tight time frame, challenging topography and a nearly 2-month construction hiatus because of COVID-19.

While seating at Polar Park will be limited until Massachusetts reaches herd immunity the good news is that NESN has recently announced they will broadcast 50 Worcester Red Sox games this season. This will give both the team and Worcester a heightened level of exposure throughout New England that will undoubtedly have viewers

making plans to come to Worcester to enjoy a game in person and learn about many of the other amenities and venues the City has to offer. The Worcester Red Sox will play approximately 70 home games at Polar Park.

In the last Sports Street column, we wondered which NFL team, The New England Patriots or Tampa Bay Buccaneers, would develop momentum at the Super Bowl. Tom Brady answered that question by leading the Bucs to their second Super Bowl victory defeating the Kansas City Chiefs, 31-9. In doing so, Brady captured his seventh Super Bowl ring and his fifth Super Bowl MVP trophy. Joe Montana and Terry Bradshaw each have four Super Bowl rings. Also mentioned in a recent Sports Street column was Green Bay Packers rookie running back A.J. Dillon as a player to watch. The second-round draft pick out of Boston College had a strong season and seemed to get better as the season progressed. It was surprising to see the

Green Bay coaching staff not feature him more prominently in the NFC Championship game given his success, at the close of season and during the play-offs.

As mentioned, the Governor's decision to allow limited seating at games will allow Worcester's other professional and collegiate league teams to move forward with their seasons. The Massachusetts Pirates, the indoor arena football team that play at the DCU Center have been announcing player acquisitions. Also, the Governor's announcement will allow the Worcester Railers to begin planning for the 2021-2022 hockey season and return of ECHL professional league play at the DCU Center. As well, Worcester's team in the Futures Collegiate Baseball League, the Worcester Bravehearts have not yet released their summer schedule but will have a new team to play this year. The Futures League announced a new team in Burlington, Vermont which will be known as the Vermont Lake Monsters.

Lastly, best of luck to all the student athletes and coaches that will be playing games out on the fields and turf in Worcester and Central Mass soon. As a result of COVID-19 the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association has allowed the fall sports that were cancelled to play an abbreviated Winter/Spring season to be followed by the traditional Spring sports season. Surely these student athletes will enjoy the competition and camaraderie after a year of lock down.

New Staff Hired at Chamber



Please welcome the Chamber's new Program and Events Coordinator Stefanie Silva (top photo), and Director of Communications Dominique Goyette-Connerty (bottom photo). Stefanie is coming to the Chamber from the hospitality industry where she most recently served as the Sales and Catering Manager at Sheraton Framingham Hotel. She lives in Worcester (born and raised!) with her husband and puppy Julius.



Dominique is returning to the Chamber after working as a producer at Worcester's 24-hour TV news station, Spectrum News 1. She previously interned with us after graduating from Fitchburg State University with her bachelor's degree in Communications Media. We're thrilled to have her back on the team working to share our story and the stories of our members! Dominique starts on March 15.

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- | Shared detailed information about accessing emergency loans and grants.
- | Helped dozens of businesses with specific requests.
- | Advocated and helped to shape local, state, and national policy related to the COVID-19 response.
- | Called every member to check in and offered assistance.
- | Transitioned events to an online platform adding 20+ webinars and virtual meetups to keep businesses connected and learning.

How We're Funded

The Chamber does not receive city, state, or federal funds. We are an independent member-driven organization funded by the business community:

- | Annual Dues
- | Advertising
- | Event Fees
- | Sponsorships

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3. Economic Development
4. Business Promotion & Advertising
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PACESETTERS: Boston Chamber Pushes Diversity Program Statewide

BOSTON - The Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce recently announced the statewide expansion of its innovative Pacesetters initiative in order to intensify the business community's efforts to address systemic inequities and racism.

Founded in 2018, the program harnesses the collective buying power of companies in Massachusetts to fulfill a bold and necessary vision to close the racial wealth gap in one generation. It is true innovation that drew that recent attention of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce board of directors and others around the state. This programmatic expansion ensures that the Pacesetters procurement opportunities for 90,000 minority business enterprises in Massachusetts substantially increase.

Pacesetters involves large and mid-sized companies and anchor institutions committed to using their procurement purchasing power to close the racial wealth gap by intentionally increasing spending with businesses of color. The Greater Boston Chamber's Pacesetter companies demonstrate their commitment to increasing their supplier diversity in both dollars and contracts across local, state, and national lines of business with an increased focus on Mass.-based businesses of color.

"When the Chamber created Pacesetters, we presented the private sector with the opportunity to commit to using procurement as an equity tool," said James E. Rooney, president & CEO of the Greater Boston Chamber. "With the new Pacesetters statewide expansion, we are unlocking the buying power across the state to substantially increase the opportunities for businesses of color. Our convening power and strong relationships with our partner business associations allow us to recruit even more buyers. We can close the racial wealth gap in one generation, and Pacesetters can help us create systemic opportunity."

In addition, the Greater Boston Chamber's Pacesetters are often connected with business support organizations with existing credible relationships with businesses of color. This ecosystem of connections add more depth to the Pacesetters program's mission by creating access and systems support.

By joining the Pacesetters program, companies and business associations from a variety of industries commit to measuring, reporting, and increasing their spending with local and state minority business enterprises (MBEs) year over year for five years. In addition to measuring, reporting and increasing spending, each Pacesetter tier has unique purposes and commitment. Pacesetters commit to sharing best procurement practices and hosting programming to support and network with businesses of color. And business associations commit to recruiting their member companies to the Pacesetters program. Signatories commit to engaging with MBEs throughout Massachusetts.

In addition to convening the buyers in the private sector, Pacesetters is now partnering with government at the state and city levels to highlight the important role of the public sector. "While not members of the private sector, when government engages in buying goods and pro-

curing services, they are practicing business and commerce. Government buying power has to be part of the equation," said Mr. Rooney.

The Chamber's long-standing relationships with Gov. Charlie Baker, now former Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh, and Dr. Karilyn Crockett, chief of equity for the City of Boston, are integral to make sure that the government's supplier diversity efforts are a success.

"The business community can make an enormous difference in building a more equitable economy by using our combined purchasing power to lift minority business enterprises. We are grateful to our many partners for their commitment to this important and timely effort," said Micho Spring, chair of Weber Shandwick's Global Corporate Practice and New England president and chair of the Greater Boston Chamber's Board of Directors.

Herby Duverné, CEO & principal of Windwalker Group and a Greater Boston Chamber board member, added, "I like the fact that the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce continues to make racial economic equity a central part of its core values. When we invest in Black and Brown businesses, we all win and the Commonwealth wins. Pacesetters has the ability to make systemic change as a respected business organization in Greater Boston. I commend Jim Rooney for his tenacity and his bold vision on ensuring that all of us thrive. I am looking forward to seeing the best of the Pacesetters in the coming years."

To ensure accuracy and accountability, every Pacesetter will submit data on local, state, and national spend with businesses of color. The data collection process is administered with Boston University's Hariri Institute for Computing and Computational Science & Engineering, a neutral third party to ensure data privacy and anonymity. With the annual submission of data from the Pacesetters, the Chamber will measure the Pacesetters' spending, including number of new MBE contracts, dollars spent with MBEs, and year over year growth in MBE spending. The aggregated data and findings will be published and shared annually to ensure accountability for the stakeholders.

CERO BENEFITS FROM PACESETTERS

As one example, CERO (Cooperative Energy, Recycling, and Organics) is a Boston worker-owned cooperative that offers food waste recycling for the commercial sector, as well as

OUR VISION

THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP IS CLOSED IN ONE GENERATION

10% OF ALL BUSINESS & GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS GO TO BUSINESSES OF COLOR IN THE COMMONWEALTH WITHIN 5 YEARS

20% OF MASSACHUSETTS' LARGEST MBEs GENERATE REVENUE OF \$50M OR MORE WITHIN 5 YEARS

compost soil products to Massachusetts agricultural projects. CERO offers compost program training, food waste recycling pick-up services, zero waste event services, and compost soil products.

CERO's Sales Team Leader and Worker-Owner, Maya Gual, said its mission is simple: to keep food waste out of landfills, save money for our clients, and provide good green jobs for Boston's hard-working communities. Gual said CERO became interested in the Pacesetters program to work with large companies to create a culture shift towards global sustainability through employee compost training and to sustainably and responsibly divert food waste away from the landfill and back to the soil. CERO currently has contracts with Northeastern University and Partners HealthCare among others.

"With the new Pacesetters statewide expansion, we are unlocking the buying power across the state to substantially increase the opportunities for businesses of color. Our convening power and strong relationships with our partner business associations allow us to recruit even more buyers."

- James E. Rooney, president & CEO of the Greater Boston Chamber

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EDUCATION - Early College is Successful Investment in Students

By Tim Murray & Mary Jo Marion

WORCESTER - High school students in Worcester represent the possibility of great achievement, not only for themselves but for their families and the community. Yet the road to success is not always smooth or equal because of economic and racial disparities that leave some behind despite their best efforts.

The Massachusetts Early College Initiative is working to increase and equalize the opportunities for success that higher education offers students, along with the economic benefits for the region fueled by an educated, diverse workforce.

Early College programs include classes taken during the regular high school day that are sequenced along specific career paths. Students initially take courses taught by accredited instructors at their high schools before progressing to classes on college campuses, first with other Early College students and then among the general university population. Beyond the specific class instruction, students gain the confidence and skills to smoothly transition to higher education. With Early College offered in each of the city's high schools, Worcester has more students benefiting from this initiative than any other community in the state.

The Commissioners of Higher Education and Elementary and Secondary Education have reached consensus that the state must increase funding and allocate \$7 million in the state budget to expand Early College this school year. The initiative's results strongly support this



enhanced investment. Strengthening Early College is an effective tool in the recovery process for COVID-19. The pandemic spurred a decrease in college enrollment among low income students. Early College has been shown to reverse this trend and must be expanded if Massachusetts is to remain among the top-ranked states for education.

Regardless of a student's economic background, college can serve as an equalizing factor on the path toward income security. The 2016 median wage income for full-time workers in Massachusetts age 25 and older rose in direct proportion to the level of education attained. Workers with a high school diploma or GED earned around \$41,000, while the income of those with bachelor's degrees increased to nearly \$69,000. Graduate degrees resulted in a median wage of about \$86,000.

One of the key difficulties students

from low-income families face in our economy is the inequity of access to college. Affordability stands out as a major barrier. Early College helps ease this burden. When participating students graduate from high school, they already have significant college credits, which reduces the time - and therefore the cost - needed to obtain a college degree. Fall 2020 Early College enrollment in Massachusetts reached 3,125 students and spring enrollment is forecast to be about 3,500. These students are expected to earn a total of 24,000 credits this school year saving their families \$5.2 million in tuition and fees.

National studies show Early College students around the country complete college at double the rate of their counterparts. Here in Massachusetts where the initiative is still young, the data show equal promise. Students taking part in Massachusetts Early College programs are enrolling

in college at a rate 53% higher than their peers and they are persisting in college at higher rates as well, a strong indicator that they will complete their degrees on time.

In Worcester, only 27% of students from the high school class of 2012 have gone on to earn college degrees. The city has recognized the low numbers as a challenge and answered by becoming the first school district in the state to establish Early College programs in all of its high schools.

Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College are committed to working as higher education partners with Worcester schools in this initiative. There are now more than 450 Worcester students enrolled in Early College, with several hundred more earning college credits through similar programs in the region.

The school district and area higher education providers have stepped up. Now they are looking to state leaders to commit to backing their efforts through supporting the budget ask.

The data are clear. Early College is a strategy that is working and worthy of increased support. The initiative is already increasing opportunities for Worcester students, whose achievements will benefit the economic and social stability of the entire region.

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

Mary Jo Marion is assistant vice president for Urban Affairs and Latino Education Institute, Worcester State University.



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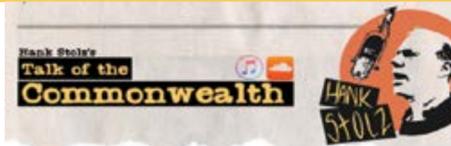
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2021 ADVERTISING RATES & DEADLINES

AUDIENCE AND CIRCULATION

Chamber Exchange the Newspaper is published quarterly by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce in March, May, Aug., and Nov.

AUDIENCE | Business professionals, chamber members, elected officials, engaged citizens, consumers.

CIRCULATION | 20,000 copies are printed and distributed as follows:

- Mailed to 6,500 Chamber members / business professionals
- Mailed to 10,500 registered voters in the City of Worcester
- Balance distributed at Chamber events & key locations throughout the city.



COST

Ad Size Cost Per Issue

Full Page	\$825
Half Page (horiz)	\$465
Half Page (vert)*	\$465
Quarter Page	\$285
Eighth Page	\$155

PREMIUM POSITIONS - FULL PAGE

Back Cover.....	\$1,350
Inside Front.....	\$1,150
Inside Back	\$1,100
Centerspread Single	\$1,000
Front Page (10" x 2")	\$ 575 SOLD

DEADLINES

PUBLICATION DATE	RESERVATION DEADLINE	SUBMISSION DEADLINE
MARCH 8, 2021	Jan. 8	Jan. 15
MAY 15, 2021	April 2	April 9
AUG. 14, 2021	July 2	July 9
NOV. 13, 2021	Oct. 1	Oct. 8

*Quantity Limited

Full Page Ad
16 inches high
10 inches wide
(4 columns wide)

Half Page Ad VERTICAL
16 inches high
4.87 inches wide
(2 columns wide)

FOR MULTIPLE INSERTIONS DISCOUNT, PAYMENT MUST BE MADE AHEAD OF TIME. NON CHAMBER MEMBERS ADD 20% TO PRICING

Design service is not available from the Chamber. However, we are happy to recommend a designer. **Ads submitted after the deadline date may not be accepted.**

TO ADVERTISE

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WooSox Primed for New Ballpark

WOOSOX, FROM PAGE 1

due to COVID-19 safety protocols, the ballpark is still on target to open for spring.

The club's home opener was previously set for April 13, until Major League Baseball informed minor league teams they were taking pandemic precautions and delaying the start of the Triple-A season by at least a month. Now, the WooSox has its sights set on a May 11 debut on Polar Park's diamond, kicking off a 12-game homestand. The team will open the season on the road versus the Buffalo Bisons May 4.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker's Feb. 25 announcement that the state could potentially move to Phase Four, Step One of reopening starting on March 22 means the team would be able to invite fans in the stands initially at 12% capacity. With Polar Park's 9,508 seats – a nod to Worcester's 508 area code – the venue will likely be limited to 1,140 people.

Rest assured, the Worcester Red Sox remain committed to inviting everyone to experience the ballpark and catch a game, but even in a non-COVID atmosphere, that process takes more than one day. Team President Dr. Charles Steinberg said, "We believe that everyone will get to partake in the opening of the park, it's just a question of how many days or weeks or months constitute the opening."

MEMBERS MAKE BALLPARK A REALITY

Building a ballpark from scratch in under 24 months is a tall order for any group of construction workers, but doing so in the face of a global pandemic is even more challenging. "It's one thing to have a tight timeframe to build something as complex and large scale as a project like this, but to add in a seven-week shutdown [...] it's such a credit to all the folks working on this," said Worcester Red Sox Director of Ballpark Planning Mr. Bart Harvey. "We'd be nowhere without them."

Gilbane Building Co./AECOM Hunt, a joint venture, served as construction manager of the Polar Park project, managing and overseeing the vast number of trade subcontractors on the job.

Despite the unexpected pandemic conditions and a job that mostly doesn't afford the luxury of working from home, Mike O'Brien, vice president and Massachusetts business unit leader at Gilbane Building Co., says dedicated workers rose to the occasion to make the park possible. "This team has worked together seamlessly through the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through it all, they have been solution-oriented and forward-looking, persevering with an unwavering goal of meeting the project schedule for Opening Day."

At its peak, as many as 250 workers were on site to build Polar Park. With such a significantly-sized project, the Worcester Redevelopment Authority and city of Worcester set forth workforce diversity goals. They asked Gilbane/AECOM Hunt and its subcontractors to have a workforce consisting of at least 25% Worcester residents, 15.3% people of color, and 6.9% females.



POLAR PARK... BY THE NUMBERS

• INITIAL COST ESTIMATE
\$86 - \$90 MILLION

• TOTAL OVERRUNS
\$26.7 MILLION

• MODIFIED TOTAL COST
\$116.7 MILLION
(CITY PAYS \$56.1 MILLION*, TEAM PAYS \$60.6 MILLION**)

• OTHER CITY COSTS
(LAND, SITE PREP, INFRASTRUCTURE)
\$41.3 MILLION
(\$9.2 MILLION IN STATE, FEDERAL GRANTS)

• MUNICIPAL PARKING FEES
VALUE: \$5
INTERMEDIATE: \$10
PREMIUM: \$15

• FACILITY FEE PER TICKET
\$2 (UP FROM \$1)

• TEAM LEASE
35 YEARS (UP FROM 30)
TEAM CANNOT RELOCATE FOR
25 YEARS (UP FROM 15)

*This number does not include what the city paid in land acquisition and site preparation. **The team's cost is made up of debt service payments through its lease to repay city borrowing, and equity contribution costs.

One group proud to regularly meet and exceed those goals are the electricians on the job. According to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 96 Worcester's Business Manager Tom Maloney, "Of all the building trades on the project, electricians have the most diverse workforce [...] so, we're very proud to have been able to do that."

The union's signatory contractor on the job, Chamber member Ostrow Electric Co., had up to 65 electricians on site at any given time. As of early February, the company was far exceeding the set goals, with a workforce made up of 36% Worcester residents, 38.4% people of color, and 8.11% women.

Operating in Worcester since 1939, Ostrow Electric's Vice President Sam Ostrow said having a local, diverse workforce was particularly important to the company. "As a Worcester resident, I want people who live here or in the immediate surrounding areas to be working in the city. Those are the people who will be going out afterwards and spending money. And that's how you build a local economy."

To secure the electrical work at Polar Park, the IBEW Local 96 marshalled resources and took a regional approach with the union's Boston chapter, Local 103, in order to be more competitive in its bid. Together, Mr. Maloney and Local 103 Business Manager Louis Antonellis were able to win the project for union workers. All electricians on the job were 'Code of Excellence' qualified – a safety and standards credential, which can only be obtained through the IBEW.

Of course, with any project of this magnitude, that safe and high-quality electric work is integral. From primary power systems and fire alarms, to field lights and audio visual communications like TVs and the scoreboard – you name it, Ostrow electricians did it. "Really from the ground up, if it was electrical in any way, we were intimately involved with it," said Mr. Ostrow.

Especially with their rich Worcester history – dating all the way back to installing the iconic neon sign at George's Coney Island – being part of creating this symbol of a next chapter in the city is immensely satisfying. "There's been a real sense of civic pride in this building. And you can feel that on site as well," Mr. Ostrow said. "There's just a real feeling that this is something we're building for everyone to enjoy [...] And it's great driving through 290; it's part of the skyline now."

As for Gilbane Building Co. – which has completed more than 20 projects in Worcester since 1950 including several tasks at WPI, the Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital, and the Worcester Trial Court Complex – Polar Park is uniquely special. "There's really nothing like building a ballpark, though, given its lasting mark on a community," Mr. O'Brien said. "We are thrilled and privileged to be part of this legacy project, one that will bring joy to thousands of people for decades to come."

SOAKING UP STORIES

Throughout construction and as the team has geared up for the move, it's safe to say the WooSox organization has left no Worcester story stone unturned.

From the Smiley Ball mascot as a tribute to Worcester native and smiley face creator Harvey Ball, to the heart-shaped field lights as recognition of the 'Heart of the Commonwealth' nickname, the retiring of jersey number six to honor the six Worcester firefighter lives lost in the tragic 1999 cold storage fire, and the 1880 Worcester logo in cast iron on the ends of seat rows, the team has covered all the bases.

Ever since a move to Worcester became a serious possibility, "The people of the city and of the greater Worcester area have just emerged as the story," Dr. Steinberg said. "Worcester has a marvelous treasure

trove of stories, and a ballpark and ball club can be a marvelous mechanism for storytelling. That's why we've been bringing so many of these elements along, because we've been listening, and we've been learning [...] It's all a dialogue with the people of the city and the region."

Another element to this story of "baseball romance," as he calls it? The team's hitting coach. When the WooSox take the field at Polar Park in May, it will be somewhat of a homecoming for former All-Star catcher and Boston Red Sox Hall of Famer Rich Gedman. Mr. Gedman grew up on Worcester's Lafayette Street, just a couple blocks away from the new minor league ballpark he'll be coaching at.

After years of built up excitement around Polar Park, it appears COVID-19 won't allow for the grand reveal and big celebration which would have been planned initially. But in the eyes of Worcester Red Sox leadership, a phased-approach to the park's opening won't necessarily be a bad thing either.

"What we've tried to do with Polar Park is have a story built into every corner," said Mr. Harvey. "Hopefully, with it being more spread out and less crowded, our fans who we're welcoming for the first time will really get to interact with the facility and see everything it has to offer." He adds that fans can expect to find little hidden surprises around the park like display cases and other projects over time.

While the team would love to open the gates to nearly 10,000 people, for now, they're just excited for the opportunity to play ball and share the park – a true team effort – with at least some of the supportive community, which rallied behind their arrival.

"The excitement we have is inspired by the excitement that comes our way from the people of the city and the region," Dr. Steinberg said. "This city has been exceptional in wearing its heart on its sleeve, and as you've seen, we embrace that heart."