

CHAMBER
EXCHANGE

THE NEWSPAPER

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Second Chance
Working with Tech
Students to Provide
Vet Care **13**

Above: A former vocational school constructed in the early 1900s was completely renovated into housing, called Voke Lofts, for \$20 million in 2014. Photo by David Sullivan.

CHAMBER RELEASES
NEW CONDO REPORT
Details Opportunities
for Homeownership
Development in Worcesterby DAVID SULLIVAN, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS
RECRUITMENT ASSOCIATE

In a city growing as fast as Worcester, homeownership development can be a powerful tool for policymakers and developers to create an invested, strong community. With this understanding, in February, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce released a report on the current market and future opportunities for condominiums in the city. The Chamber's aim with the report was to generate increased interest in condo developments in Worcester, seeing as condos provide affordable paths to homeownership.

Even prior to the pandemic, Massachusetts' housing market had been in crisis. Accordingly, the Chamber has been a leader in the Worcester community when it comes to research on housing. In 2019, a landmark housing study titled, "Worcester for Everyone: A Regional Housing and Economic Study Outlining Local Opportunity," was released. The study was conducted by Smart Growth Economics, whose co-founder, Dr. Mahesh Ramachandran, now serves as a chief

economist for the state government.

After surveying the current market and statistical trends, the housing study concluded that more production would be needed to meet Worcester's rapid population growth if it increased 15,000 people by 2030. Worcester's 2020 census data shows the population has already increased by 25,000 people. The shortage of housing production in recent years is reflected in the rising costs of housing and Worcester's status as one of the hottest real estate markets in the country.

The 2019 housing report has been cited by several developers as instrumental in persuading them to build to meet the demand for housing of all types in Worcester. However, nearly all the recently completed and proposed developments have been rental housing; no major condo developments have been announced. While the surge of new housing developments—with more than 3,800 units in the pipeline alone—is a boon for the city and necessary to meet short- and intermediate-term

HOUSING, PG 10

Family Grounds, Inc. Transforming Gateway Park Neighborhood

by DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

For Hamid and Neelu Mohaghegh, "family" is more than blood relations and more than a buzzword in their company's name.

With his business experience and real estate expertise, and her creativity and passion, the father-daughter duo is working to make meaningful, community spaces in Worcester's Gateway Park area to bring cohesion to the neighborhood.

IRANIAN IMMIGRANT RISES TO SUCCESS

In 1973, Hamid Mohaghegh emigrated from Iran to the U.S. at 18 years old for college. To pay tuition, he worked two back-to-back factory shifts—including at Reed and Prince Manufacturing, Johnson Steel & Wire Co., and Parking Manufacturing Co.—but realized that just making ends meet wasn't going to suffice much longer. "It kind of pushed me to become an entrepreneur," Mr. Mohaghegh recalled. "For many coming from abroad [...] the opportunities in the U.S. are fabulous for allowing

people to try and work hard to make it."

He started an ice cream truck business, driving around the city to ballparks and other common areas, and was able to do well for himself—and for his wife and brother—financially.

After graduating from pharmacy school in 1979 (and obtaining citizenship in 1977), Mr. Mohaghegh stayed in the U.S., and, as he had children and started a family of his own, worked in several executive-level positions at places like Holden Pharmacy, Harrington Hospital, and Heywood Hospital. He also worked in a Dubai hospital for a few years before deciding to go back to working for himself.

In 2000, Mr. Mohaghegh started Family Pharmacy, an independent chain of pharmacies across the Commonwealth. At its peak, the company had 114 employees and 13 locations in Massachusetts. While his corporate office was located in the Northworks building on Worcester's Grove Street, the gentleman who owned



Right: Surrounded by her parents and local leaders, Neelu Mohaghegh cuts the ribbon on her new Fuel America franchise in the Northworks Building. Photo by Dominique Goyette-Connerty.

FAMILY GROUNDS, PG 14

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CHAMBER AMBASSADORS PROGRAM CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

by **MARVIN SILVER**, PARTNER AT CHRISTOPHER, HAYS, WOJCIK & MAVRICOS, LLP

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's Ambassadors Committee celebrates its 30th year of existence this spring.

I remember receiving a call in 1992 from Dan Verrico, who indicated that the Chamber was creating a new committee that would assist with its many goals including membership retention. Though I had been practicing law for about 15 years and knew that a chamber of commerce existed locally, I had never participated in any chamber events and was not quite sure what the chamber did; but I knew Dan and he had impressed me as a dynamo with boundless positive energy and enthusiasm. He indicated: "You need to be part of this committee," so my response was naturally: "Sign me up!"

The early days of the committee were exciting as the number of participants grew to about 80 Chamber members. At one point, membership had grown so quickly that the Chamber announced it was going to cut off new ambassador memberships and create a waiting list. We realized that we had a great committee when, one winter's day during that first year, 35 members showed up at Chamber headquarters at 8 am in the middle of a blizzard, with at least six inches of snow having fallen in the previous few hours. (Before that storm, we had no formal meeting "cancellation policy" in case of snow.)

Over the years, the committee has provided the Chamber with valuable support such as assisting at various events, contacting existing members to welcome them to the Chamber, and soliciting new members.

Becoming a member of the Ambassadors Committee is a great way to be aware of all of the events that are happening at the Chamber, making it easy to "network" and form valuable connections with other local professionals and businesspeople. In fact, we like to say that participation in the Ambassadors Committee is a "license to network." A camaraderie develops between the ambassadors, and friendships are created that last a lifetime. New Chamber members should consider joining the Ambassadors Committee as a way to get involved with the Chamber once they are eligible to do so (after one year of Chamber membership).

Those who are interested in learning more about participating in the Ambassadors Committee should contact the Chamber's Director of Membership Sales & Service, Kristen Luna, to request an invitation to the next meeting. Ambassador meetings are usually held on the first Wednesday of the month (except during July and August) at 7:30 am.

I credit my involvement with the Chamber and the Ambassadors Committee as being instrumental in the development of my law practice. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve as a member of the Ambassadors Committee since its inception, and highly recommend getting involved to others in our local business community. ♥

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Problem-Solving with Peers, BOD Group Offers Answers and Accountability

by **ALLISON CHISOLM**, BOD FACILITATOR

owning a business can be a lonely job. Small business owners fill their days working in their business, but rarely make the time to work on their business. And when they do, they're often talking to themselves.

That's where the Business Owners' Dialogue Group (BOD) comes in. A no-cost benefit for Chamber members, this selective group of non-competing business owners meets monthly for a deep dive into common challenges, managing employees, financing growth, investing in new technology, and finding new customers.

Some months include outside speakers on HR, taxes, succession planning, and more. Other months feature a member "hot seat" to talk through a specific issue they are wrestling with, leading to lively problem-solving sessions. Meetings run on the third Thursday from 8 am to noon.

"It's a great sounding board with other subject matter experts," says one longstanding member, Andrew Zawada of Zawada Insurance. "That diversity is always a key ingredient for me in choosing to join or continue in a group." Plus, he says, "they're not trying to sell me something."

Current members are in commercial security, managed IT, commercial real estate/retail, manufacturing/R&D, marketing communications, and property/casualty insurance.

"I like the dynamics of the group's different perspectives," says Scott Finestone of Praesidium Security. "We weigh in and help each other, coaching and counseling."

BOD is also an accountability group. Each member offers updates on recent highlights and lowlights of their business and answers, "Did you do what you said you'd do last month?" Not surprisingly, those who say "yes" see better success.

For Jesse Silverberg of Multiscale Systems, it's a community of peers to learn from. "If I have a question about my business' operations, I can talk to my employees. For questions on my business, I can ask this group," he says, both during and between meetings.

"I appreciate the different methods of thinking and methodologies," says Trave Harmon of Triton Technologies. "My approach may produce results but not in a way I want. This is an opportunity to learn."

For those business owners thinking about applying to join BOD, Jesse offers this advice: "Just do it."

To inquire about joining BOD, please contact the Chamber's Director of Membership Sales & Service, Kristen Luna, at 508.753.2924 or kluna@worcesterchamber.org. ♥

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

Each quarter, 20,000 copies are mailed to 6,000 members and business professionals and roughly 13,000 City of Worcester registered voters. The remainder are distributed among area businesses.

If you're interested in being a point of distribution, or would like to know more about placing an advertisement in the Chamber Exchange, please contact Kristen Luna at kluna@worcesterchamber.org. To contact the editorial staff, please email Dominique Goyette-Connerty at DGoyetteConnerty@worcesterchamber.org

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

Worcester Regional Chamber CALENDAR of EVENTS

May

MAY 20 • 12:00PM • CHAMBER OFFICE

President's Council *with* Congressman James McGovern
Sponsors: Fallon Health and Marsh McLennan Agency

MAY 25 • 11:00AM • CHAMBER OFFICE

Construction & Real Estate Roundtable *with* Luba Zhaurova, City of Worcester
Director of Sustainable Projects
Sponsor: Bowditch & Dewey and Dorfman Capital

MAY 26 • 12:00PM • LIVE ON ZOOM

Healthcare Roundtable - Mental Healthcare: A significant increase since the onset of COVID-19
Sponsors: Blue Cross Blue Shield of MA and Saint Vincent Hospital

MAY 26 • 12:00PM • POLAR PARK - DCU CLUB

Business After Hours Annual Awards Ceremony & Networking Event
Sponsors: Blue Cross Blue Shield of MA, Fidelity Bank & Mass Pirates

June

JUNE 2 • 7:00AM • ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY

The Breakfast Club
Presenting Sponsors: Blue Cross Blue Shield of MA & Country Bank

JUNE 7 • 11:00AM • CHAMBER OFFICE

Manufacturing Roundtable *with* Aaron Birt and Sean Kelly, co-founders of Solvus Global
Sponsors: AIS, FLEXcon, MassHire WB

JUNE 16 • 7:30AM • DCU CENTER

13th Annual Worcester Women's Leadership Conference
Presenting Sponsors: The Hanover Insurance Group, UMass Memorial Health

JUNE 27 • 7:30AM • CHARTER OAK COUNTRY CLUB

32nd Annual William J. Short Memorial Golf Tournament
Presenting Sponsor: Point32 Health

JUNE 30 • EAST PARK

City of Worcester's Independence Day Fireworks
Sponsored by Fallon Health

July

JULY 14 • 5:00PM • FITTON FIELD

Worcester Bravehearts Brew Fest & Game Night
Sponsors: Commonwealth Consulting

Chamber and LABO Establish Formal Partnership

by **TIMOTHY P. MURRAY**, PRESIDENT & CEO



Each year, the Latin American Business Organization (LABO) coordinates and hosts a Latin American Business Expo with the intent to provide a platform for local, Latino-owned businesses to promote, market, and advertise their products and services to a broad, impressionable audience. At this year's expo held at the DCU Center on April 30, LABO and the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce announced the formation of an exciting partnership that establishes LABO

as the newest affiliate organization of the Chamber.

This new affiliate partnership allows LABO's 350 members full access to the Chamber's programs, events, and services. This three-year agreement between our two organizations will help facilitate and cross pollinate business relationships between many of Worcester's long standing companies and the fast-growing number of Latino-owned businesses.

We believe this new partnership will result in great success for both Chamber member and LABO member businesses, and will strengthen the Central Massachusetts economy.

The Central Massachusetts Latino community is, in and of itself, both diverse and growing, with connections to many different countries. This growth is captured in data from multiple sources. The most recent U.S. Census data for Worcester shows that the Hispanic community grew by 13,000 (+34.2%) between 2010 and 2020, from 37,000 to 50,000 residents. This represents 25% of the city's overall population. In the Worcester Public Schools during the current academic year, 44.7% of students are Hispanic, according to the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The City of Worcester's Latino Advisory Commission reported that 60.7% of Latinos are in the workforce. This is the second-highest rate of any demographic subgroup in Worcester. Moreover, the Latino/Hispanic community is one of the fastest-growing populations at the national level, increasing by almost 15% between 2010 and 2020.

Also according to state data, Hispanic and Latino students had the fastest growth rate in college enrollment between 2010 and 2019, showing a 5.3% increase—more growth than any other demographic. Moreover, Hispanic and Latino students have had the highest growth rates in graduation at 88% over a similar period of time. I'd argue that data points like these demonstrate the importance of increasing wealth and earning in the local Latino community, and are incredibly relevant to our higher education sector here in Central Massachusetts.

These numbers create an urgency to establish an integrated, growing, and inclusive economy for our region. Both Chamber and LABO leadership believes this partnership lays a strong foundation for building economic success for our member businesses, creating jobs, and furthering the economic momentum in Central Mass. Through joint programming and events, facilitation of more business-to-business transactions, and advocacy efforts which establish greater access to governmental institutions for communities of color, we believe that together, our two organizations can make this vision a reality. We at the Worcester Chamber are grateful and excited that LABO President Elizabeth Cruz and her board are partnering with us in this mission.

Finally, we want to thank Fallon Health and UniBank for being the groundbreaking sponsors of this partnership. The partnership makes LABO the Worcester Chamber's sixth partner affiliate organization, growing our membership to approximately 2,350 members. Our other affiliate partners include the Auburn, Blackstone Valley, Central Mass. South, Wachusett Area, and Webster Dudley Oxford (WDO) chambers of commerce. Please join us in welcoming LABO to the Worcester Regional Chamber's community of members! ♥



Above: Leaders announce formal partnership between Chamber and LABO at LABO's annual expo. From left: UniBank CEO Michael Welch, LABO President Elizabeth Cruz, Chamber President & CEO Tim Murray, UniBank Relationship Banker Yessica Rivas, Fallon Health President & CEO Richard Burke, and Massachusetts Latino Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Andrew Melendez. Photo by Stefanie Silva.

Several Local and State Legislative Updates to Be on Lookout For

by ALEX GUARDIOLA, VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AND PUBLIC POLICY



As the Chamber continues to monitor the weekly Worcester City Council meetings, as well as numerous boards and commissions meetings, I also continue to keep a close eye on other initiatives happening more regionally and on state and federal levels. This year marks the first time in nearly a decade that we will have a new governor and lieutenant governor. We'll also have a new state senator replacing Senator Harriette Chandler—someone who

has worked tirelessly to include Worcester in the state budget while advocating for social justice issues throughout her tenure. Worcester may see a new mayor this year, since Mayor Joseph Petty is running for Senator Chandler's seat against YWCA COO Robyn Kennedy. And of course, City Manager Edward Augustus is leaving after eight years in the position working to progress Worcester.

Though the city has made significant economic development and quality of life strides in the last few years, engaged residents, business owners, and organizations will need to remain vigilant in monitoring local projects, as several could affect hearts and pockets directly—especially given all this aforementioned change in leadership.

OUTDOOR DINING

During the pandemic, businesses had to make a number of adjustments in order to keep their doors open and continue to generate enough revenue to retain employees. One of the hardest hit sectors during COVID was the hospitality industry. Restaurants, bars, and hotels were among the first required to close and the last permitted to open at full capacity. When social distancing and capacity restrictions were still in place, using parking lots and other spaces for outdoor dining was allowed temporarily.

Here in Worcester, the concept of outdoor dining hadn't been fully embraced in the past. Prior to the pandemic, it took special votes and permitting to even get an outdoor deck or patio installed on your own property. Naysayers continuously made the case that outdoor dining would cause traffic and parking issues as well as noise nuisances to abutting neighbors. Facing enough pandemic-related challenges as it was, several restaurant owners took advantage of the unprecedented temporary outdoor dining opportunity, putting the well thought-out plan into action. These responsible restaurant owners proved that outdoor dining is possible in Worcester and that it should be here to stay.

The outdoor emergency order was set to expire on April 1 of this year. Although the program was successful across the Commonwealth, the state legislature needed to vote to extend the policy. Proactively, the Worcester License Commission approved outdoor dining here in the city, "pending state approval." Because the extension of outdoor dining was attached to a \$1.6 billion spending bill that would also funnel hundreds of millions more dollars into COVID-19 treatments, testing, and vaccine efforts, the approval continued to get delayed since state senators were still negotiating the whole bill.

On March 24, the senate passed the bill with the extension of outdoor dining. The Chamber hoped outdoor dining would have been permanently extended and the licensing power granted to the individual municipalities, but it was only extended until April 1, 2023.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BILL

On April 21, Governor Charlie Baker filed legislation to make \$3.5 billion in investments to support Massachusetts' path forward as we transition into a post-pandemic world. This included projects to strengthen state infrastructure, create jobs, and invest in all 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth.

The legislation, called: "An Act Investing in Future Opportunities for Resiliency, Workforce, and Revitalized Downtowns" (FORWARD) includes \$2.3 billion in funding from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and more than \$1.256 billion in capital bond authorizations.

The FORWARD bill includes \$1.2 billion in ARPA funds for climate resiliency and preservation efforts, \$750 million of which would be invested in the Commonwealth's clean energy industry, thereby building on Gov. Baker's October 2021 proposal. The bill also proposes \$413 million to support 100-plus projects across state parks and trails, water and sewer systems, and environmental infrastructure grant programs.

Additionally, it proposes nearly \$970 million to support revitalization efforts in the Commonwealth's downtowns and communities. This includes \$318 million in ARPA funding and \$650 million in bond authorization—\$550 million of which would go to the MassWorks program: \$400 million in reauthorization and \$147 million in ARPA funds to support 94 local projects. Nearly 250 municipalities would receive downtown recovery grants totaling \$108 million.

The FORWARD bill also includes \$325 million in ARPA funding for workforce efforts, with \$300 million for the Unemployment Trust Fund to address unemployment overpayments. The HireNow program, which provides grants to employers to train and hire new workers, would receive \$25 million.

It proposes \$270 million in authorization to support housing production across the Commonwealth, including affordable rental housing production and rehabilitation, public housing, climate resilient housing, and transit-oriented development. And it makes several policy proposals to increase housing production, including an increase of the cap on the Housing Development Incentive Program from \$10 million to \$30 million.

COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ACT

Last month, a group of Worcester residents requested that the city council approve an order to allow Worcester voters to determine if the city should adopt the Community Preservation Act (CPA) by a binding question on the November 8 ballot. The city council approved the order 7-3 votes on April 5, allowing the question on the ballot. While there have been a few attempts to get the CPA on the ballot in the past, this is the first time it will be on the ballot in Worcester.

Worcester will vote on whether to adopt a 1.5% surcharge with exemptions for the first \$100,000 of residential and commercial property for low-income households and some seniors who qualify for a low-income exemption. Proponents argue that the city could raise approximately \$3.6 million annually for historic preservation, outdoor recreation, open space, and community housing.

And though those sound like great concepts, we must always consider at what cost a program like this would come. Currently, Worcester is experiencing astronomically high gas prices, record-high housing costs, workforce shortages, supply chain issues, and, of course, the sixth-highest commercial tax rate in the Commonwealth. Additional burdens are not fair to the small businesses—many of which just barely survived the pandemic. We are just starting to emerge from one of the worst health and economic crises in our nation's history. Piling surcharges on residents and commercial property owners at this time is something that should be very carefully considered. There are hundreds of millions of dollars in ARPA funding yet to be spent which can address some of the same issues this CPA would be aiming to address.

MUCH MORE TO COME

As you can tell, there is plenty to monitor this year as far as government affairs and public policy matters go. We at the Chamber will continue to keep a watchful eye on as many as possible and provide updates as warranted about how these matters impact businesses in our area. In addition to the CPA ballot question, there will also be a question asking if app-based drivers should be considered full-time employees rather than independent contractors. There's a sports betting bill which passed through the state senate—and, at the time of writing, will be going to committee shortly—that could produce upwards of \$70 million in tax revenue per year. There's a millionaire's tax that could implement a tax levy on households making more than \$1 million per year. Again: there's so much to be following at the local and state levels in the next six months. Rest assured that the Chamber staff is working hard every day to advocate on behalf of our member businesses and what's in the best interests of our regional economy. ❤️

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Worcester's Oldest Brick Building Converted Into Downtown Housing

by **DAVID SULLIVAN**, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS RECRUITMENT ASSOCIATE

If not for a new plaque on the front of the building, many passersby in downtown Worcester would not notice the former Elwood Adams Hardware Store as anything special. The four-story brick building, however, was the first brick building built in Worcester. It was constructed in 1782—seven years before George Washington's presidency.

The long time occupant of the building, Elwood Adams Hardware Store, was the longest continually operated hardware store in the United States. Elwood Adams closed its doors at 156 Main St. in 2017 after 235 years in business.

Now, the 15,000 square-foot hardware store is home to 13 units of market-rate housing, with mostly one-bedroom units that have modern amenities like in-unit laundry, marble countertops, and brand-new appliances.

In a February 24 ribbon cutting ceremony attended by the mayor, city manager, and other local dignitaries, Hingham-based developer Hugh McLaughlin of Ballybreen Ventures said that his first project in Worcester was something he and his team are proud of. "I've been to many places where it's always been a fight [...] but everything here was positive," said Mr. McLaughlin while giving a nod to the city's support for the project. "Elwood Adams will continue to be a vibrant building and an asset to the city."

Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Timothy P. Murray first reached out to Mr. McLaughlin about the Elwood Adams building after it closed permanently in 2017. Mr. McLaughlin, a longtime friend of Mr. Murray, had expressed interest in a Worcester development for some time and mentioned during the ribbon cutting that his friend Tim was a driving factor in bringing him to Worcester.

Scot Butcher of Tax Incentive Finance, a firm that worked with Mr. McLaughlin on the project's financing, indicated that the state's Housing Development Incentive Program (HDIP) and local historic tax credits were instrumental to the preservation project.

"This project wouldn't have happened without the historic tax credit and [tax increment exemption]," said Mr. Butcher. "There are a lot of challenges that come with a building that was built before George Washington was president."

The project received a tax increment exemption (TIE) negotiated with the city council, which gave Ballybreen more than \$59,000 in savings on new property taxes generated by the project over the next 10 years while creating more than \$88,000 in new taxes for the city. With the TIE in place, Ballybreen is eligible to apply for a tax credit from HDIP which would be worth up to \$850,000—a significant return for the \$4 million renovation.

HDIP is only accessible by developers building market-rate rental units in Gateway Cities like Worcester. The Chamber has worked diligently with partners in the City of Worcester and in other Gateway Cities around the state to advocate for raising the HDIP program's annual tax credit cap. The hope is that post-industrial cities like Worcester can introduce more quality market-rate housing to revitalize downtown areas by constructing on vacant lots or preserving historic buildings like Elwood Adams.

Elwood Adams is not the end of Ballybreen's work in Worcester. The firm has already started the process of constructing 45 new units of housing and three retail and restaurant spaces at 1 Exchange Place, another historic downtown property which used to be police and fire headquarters.

City Manager Edward Augustus praised his economic development team, led by the city's Chief Development Officer Peter Dunn, in working hand-and-glove with the Ballybreen team to achieve the historic preservation project at Elwood Adams.

"If this was the Worcester of 20 years ago and Elwood Adams closed [...] this building would have sat empty and would have continued to deteriorate," said the city manager. "It would have been a symbol of what used to be and what could have been."

Instead, Elwood Adams joins the ranks of hundreds of new housing units being added to the downtown corridor as Worcester continues to attract developers from all over the country. As City Manager Augustus described it: "Worcester is open for business." ♥



Left: Scot Butcher cuts the ribbon at a celebration for the grand opening of the housing units in the former Elwood Adams Hardware building. Photo by Dominique Goyette-Connerty.

BREAKING GROUND Cutting Ribbons

Congrats to these Chamber members on their recent or upcoming ribbon cuttings, ground breakings, and exciting milestones!

MINT KITCHEN & BAR

May 2 @ 4pm
79 Maywood St., Worcester
(New restaurant, ribbon cutting)

LUTHERAN REHABILITATION & SKILLED CARE CENTER

May 4 @ 4pm
26 Harvard St., Worcester
(Groundbreaking for additional rehab unit)

CROSSFIT WORCESTER / CFW ATHLETICS & FITNESS

May 7 @ 1:15pm
10 Pullman St., Worcester
(Ribbon cutting celebrating 10 years in business)

SIDCHANNEL

May 12 @ 4pm
146 Main St., Suite 405, Worcester
(New HQ location, ribbon cutting)

WOOD PARTNERS

May 18 @ 2pm
22 - 28 Mulberry St., Worcester
(Groundbreaking)

HAMPTON INN & SUITES / COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT - WORCESTER

June 8 @ 4pm
72 Grove St., Worcester
(Reopening and new renovations)

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Turner Announces Major Life Sciences Funding at Chamber Event

TWO LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS RECEIVE MILLIONS

by DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Not every Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce event draws the attention of local media outlets due to newsworthy announcements—but that was the case for the first Breakfast Club of 2022.

Like every other Breakfast Club, the March edition gave attendees the chance to network with other professionals, celebrate several member businesses and organizations for their milestones, and hear from a dignified keynote speaker, all while enjoying their morning coffee and breakfast.

This time around, though, those early morning bites were served with a side of breaking news: two organizations in Worcester would be receiving millions of dollars in capital funds from the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center's (MLSC) Research Infrastructure program—a program through which MLSC invests in innovative infrastructure across Massachusetts that's in high demand from both academic and industry scientists.

Serving as the event's keynote speaker, Kenneth Turner, new president & CEO of the MLSC, announced \$28.3 million was being awarded to 10 projects across the Commonwealth—including projects at Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives (MBI) and UMass Chan Medical School. MBI received \$3 million toward expansion of their ScaleUp Center, which provides incubator space for life sciences companies. UMass Chan received just over \$2 million for a project enabling nanoscale imaging of viruses of pandemic potential.

Given the burgeoning nature of the life sciences industry and Massachusetts' position as a global leader in its innovation, the Chamber had invited Mr. Turner to deliver a timely address on the sector's eco-

nomical impact, what the MLSC and other partners are doing to support its growth, and how Worcester and Central Mass play a role in that success.

"There's so much energy, there's so much excitement, there's so much vibrancy going on in the life sciences community across the state. But there's no better example of it than right here in Worcester," Mr. Turner said, indicating how the state's second-largest city is faring compared to Boston and Cambridge.

Despite living in Boston and only being in this new role for a little over a year, Mr. Turner said he'd already been out to Worcester for tours and meetings five times.

Mr. Turner also discussed how critical the life sciences industry is in Massachusetts for job creation, citing a prediction which estimates 21- to 24-million square feet of lab and office space coming online in the next three years, meaning approximately 40,000 new jobs are coming to Central Mass.

"What that says to me is that we have a lot of work to do," he said. "My No. 1 focus is going to be three things: jobs, jobs, and jobs. More importantly, I want to make sure that those jobs are not completely confined and localized to the Cambridge and Boston metro area."

Presented by sponsors AllWays Health Partners and Fidelity Bank, along with supporting sponsor MBI and coffee sponsor College of the Holy Cross, March's Breakfast Club saluted seven Chamber members for significant milestones.

The Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center was recognized for their 50th anniversary, while six other Chamber members were saluted as new leaders of their respective organizations. Those



Right: MLSC's Kenn Turner addresses Chamber members at the March Breakfast Club. Photo by Matt Wright, Wright Photo Studios.

taking on new leadership positions were: Aimee Peacock, president of FLEXcon—making her the first woman to hold the position since the company's founding in 1956; Jim Ayres, president & CEO of the Greater Worcester Community Foundation; Kevin Breen, headmaster at Worcester Academy; Noreen Johnson Smith, president & CEO of the EcoTarium; Pete Lancette, CEO of Fairlawn Rehab Hospital; and Vincent Rougeau, president at College of the Holy Cross—making him the first lay and first Black person to ever serve in the role.

Maria Fernandes-Dominique, director of public affairs at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, made her debut as Chief Greeter. In her remarks, she pointed out it had been almost two years to the exact day since the Chamber hosted a Breakfast Club in this same venue; it was March 5, 2020 that a couple hundred people gathered in the College of the Holy Cross' Hogan Campus Center—a mere two weeks later, the world effectively shut down due to the coronavirus pandemic. ♥

Held quarterly, The Breakfast Club typically draws about 200 professionals; the next will be held at Assumption University on June 2. Visit WorcesterChamber.org to register.



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How MA is Addressing Waste Management Capacity Challenge

by MIRANDA HOTHAM, WORCESTER GREEN CORPS COORDINATOR



Like many other places across the country, waste and materials management in the Commonwealth has changed dramatically over the last decade. Changes in the global recycling market have led to limited recycling capacity, depressed prices, and increased recycling costs. Solid waste disposal capacity throughout the Northeast has continued to decrease as more landfills close and are not replaced. Coupled with this is the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased household waste across the globe. The pandemic led many households and businesses to consume single-use items at a much higher rate, resulting in a dramatic increase to the overall waste volume and adding more strain to an already stressed management system. As the options for waste management become more limited, the cost of solid waste management will continue to rise, and we will have difficulty shipping trash for disposal in other states.

Every 10 years, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) closely analyzes the contents of our waste stream and capacity for materials management. They particularly look at the top materials found in the trash, as well as the options to divert these materials to other means of disposal. As a result of this extensive research, the MassDEP develops the Solid Waste Master Plan (SWMP), which establishes the Commonwealth's policy framework to address solid waste issues among Massachusetts residents and businesses. The 2030 Solid Waste Master Plan (2030 Plan), published in October of 2021, proposes a broad vision and strategies for how our community will manage waste over the next decade and beyond.

In February 2019, MassDEP published the Massachusetts Materials Management Capacity Study, which showed a decrease in management capacity for landfills, combustion, and materials recovery facilities (MRFs). The study found that landfill capacity for municipal solid waste and construction and demolition debris (C&D) is projected to decline to virtually zero by the end of 2030. While Massachusetts does have an extensive capacity for waste transfer, this doesn't mean much when there is nowhere with the capacity to take in the solid waste. However, the study also found that there is a larger capacity across the Commonwealth to handle food materials in the waste stream. The state has several thousand tons of available capacity between anaerobic digestion and composting.

Over the most recent decade, Massachusetts has also built a comprehensive grant and assistance program for municipalities and businesses to address source reduction and increase management capacity. Programs such as the Recycling Business Development Grant and the Recycling Loan Fund have been successful in driving recycling market growth in the Commonwealth and increasing investments in recycling businesses. Since 2010, MassDEP has provided \$40 million in grants, loans, and assistance to support recycling. MassDEP has also devoted significant effort to reducing the rate of contamination in recycling bins by developing the Recycling IQ Kit and the Recycle Smart initiative.

Moving forward, the MassDEP hopes that the Commonwealth will see a 30% waste reduction by 2030, and a 90% reduction by 2050. In order to achieve these ambitious goals, the 2030 Plan outlines detailed and specific action items that will help ensure adequate capacity to manage waste, as well as steps to take for source reduction. The 2030 Plan establishes subcommittees and workgroups, requires a midway program review, increases emphasis on the need to reduce and reuse, works to build local markets for our recyclables, and provides more engagement with and support for Environmental Justice Communities. In addition to the overall source reduction, the MassDEP hopes that the 2030 Plan will reduce the toxicity of municipal solid waste streams by improving the availability of household hazardous waste collection programs and implementing producer responsibility approaches for targeted materials. By 2050, MassDEP strives to reduce and begin to phase out the use of hazardous products.

Much like our vision at the Worcester Green Corps, MassDEP recognizes that to reach a zero-waste future our society must make systemic changes in how we produce, distribute, sell, and use products and services. This is going to require Massachusetts to move towards policies that encourage and require any reusable, recyclable, or compostable material to be diverted from disposal at a very high

rate. Additionally, policies and actions will need to be aimed at source reduction, eliminating the use of products or packaging which are not reusable, recyclable, or compostable. It is also essential for Massachusetts residents and business owners to recognize the power in their consumption powers. If we as a society eliminate single-use items from our lifestyle, the market will naturally respond, resulting in the decreased production and sale of these products. A zero-waste future is possible, but it will require significant cultural and societal change.

ABOUT WORCESTER GREEN CORPS

The Worcester Green Corps (WGC) is a partnership program of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, the City of Worcester, Worcester Community Action Council, and the United Way of Central Massachusetts, established in May of 2021. As Worcester experiences new levels of economic development and investment, it's in everyone's best interests to ensure the city is clean and inviting to residents and visitors alike. WGC is a collaborative effort to keep Worcester's streets and green spaces clean and beautiful on a year-round basis. WGC partners aim to augment existing cleanup efforts by leveraging the involvement of the business and nonprofit communities to assist in implementing beautification and environmental best practices throughout the city.

In addition to these year-round efforts, WGC works with the Worcester Community Action Council (WCAC) and FreshStart508 to provide opportunities for leadership and employment to youth and systemically disadvantaged groups. WCAC's YouthWorks program occurs in three sessions: a six-week program in the summer, a 12-week program in the fall, and a 12-week program in the spring. The youth workers have the opportunity to learn about career readiness, green initiatives, and environmental careers, as well as to gain experience in leadership, community organizing, and program planning. FreshStart508 supplements the youth's efforts to beautify the city with their "So Fresh and So Clean" team. Through these collaborations, WGC, WCAC, and FreshStart508 are able to offer outreach and educational tools for employability, environmentalism, and mental health services to the community.

Worcester Green Corps is an official chapter of Keep Massachusetts Beautiful.

To learn more, get involved, sponsor, or donate, please visit

WorcesterGreenCorps.org. ♥



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CONDO STUDY , CONTINUED

housing demands, long-term solutions for homeownership have not been met with the same sense of urgency.

Earlier this year, the Chamber embarked on an analysis of the housing market to follow up on this 2019 housing study by focusing on developing homeownership opportunities through the addition of new condos to the housing stock. Condos, with an average sale price of \$200,000, can be an affordable way for first-time homebuyers to get into the market and own property.

Using data gathered from the city, the Chamber found that there are only 5,000 condo units in Worcester, comprising about 6% of the total housing stock. By and large, these units are in duplexes or low-rise condo complexes, with only about 400 units in denser high-rise condo developments. Only about 600 units are located within walking distance of downtown, creating a challenge for Worcester’s economic development aspirations to be a vibrant and walkable 18-hour downtown.

Further concern comes from the fact that Worcester has the 14th lowest homeownership rate in the country for mid-sized cities. About 60% of the city’s residents rent their housing, even though a 2019 study by the Worcester Regional Research Bureau found that those who rent spend more on their housing costs each month than homeowners do, regardless of income level.

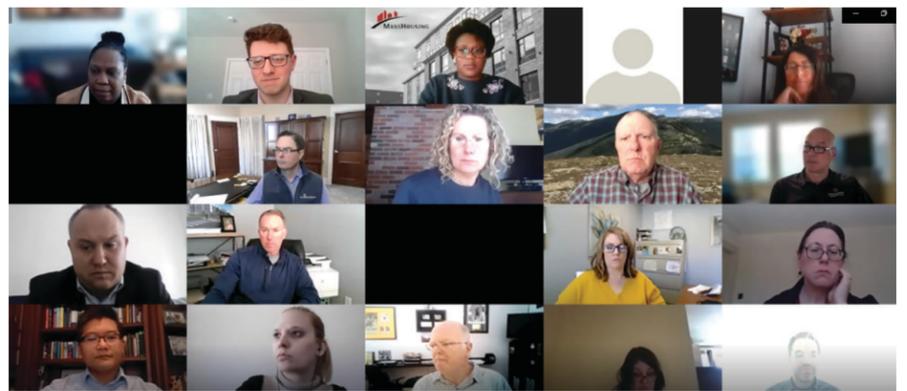
With homeownership rates among communities of color being much lower than white households in Worcester, this presents an issue of economic and social justice. Studies show that increased homeownership rates in a community correlate to improved outcomes in education, wealth-building, public safety, property maintenance, and community investment. As such, presenting more affordable homeownership opportunities to households of color by bridging the gap with condos can improve socioeconomic outcomes for all.

COMMONWEALTH BUILDER

The Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency, or MassHousing, recognizes that housing production must be an equitable endeavor that benefits all. Under the leadership of Executive Director Chrystal Kornegay, MassHousing recently launched the Commonwealth Builder Program.

Ms. Kornegay joined Worcester Chamber members in March for a Construction & Real Estate Roundtable to discuss with local developers how the program works and how it could be implemented in Worcester, which has not yet seen a Commonwealth Builder-subsidized project.

CommonWealth Builder is designed to incentivize the production of homeownership opportunities in Gateway Cities like Worcester by subsidizing developers up to \$250,000 per unit and \$10 million per development. A recent infusion of



Above: MassHousing Executive Director Chrystal Kornegay (top left) and her team answer questions from developers during a Construction & Real Estate Roundtable. Screen capture.

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) stimulus allowed MassHousing to increase its subsidies per development to this level. The condos or single-family homes created must be new construction and must be income restricted.

Income restrictions are set between 70% and 120% of the area’s median income, or about \$69,000 to \$118,560 for a household of four. In affordable housing, this range of income is typically referred to as “workforce housing,” or housing for individuals who earn too much to qualify for low-income housing and too little to afford many market-rate units.

“When we talk about workforce housing, we like to give people an idea of who we are talking about,” said Ms. Kornegay during the Chamber’s roundtable event. “A union construction worker, a healthcare support staff person, a single mother working as a nurse raising two children—these are the types of people who are struggling right now in the marketplace,” she said, noting that this moderate-income, workforce housing bracket was typically overlooked when it came to new developments.

Ms. Kornegay, who read the Chamber’s condo report, noted that it was important to encourage workforce housing all around the city, but especially in areas like downtown where there is a dearth of condos.

“You’ve seen a 14% increase in population over the past decade, and over the last fifteen years or so there’s been \$4.5 billion in investment in Worcester,” said Ms. Kornegay. “Yet there is a low rate of homeownership, especially downtown.”

About 60 developers, property management firms, construction firms, brokers, bankers, and local professionals from other industries in the Worcester area were present for the roundtable. The Chamber continues to build on its work with the condo report by following up with developers and starting conversations about condo development, especially developments that take advantage of Commonwealth Builder’s generous subsidies.

The full condo report can be viewed on the Chamber’s website, worcesterchamber.org, under the Economic Development tab, in the Reports and Proposals subtab. ♥

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5 QUESTIONS with

PEO NATHAN, COMPUTERVAULT CEO

by DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

In each edition, *Chamber Exchange: The Newspaper* includes one question-and-answer-style interview with a Chamber member who's making a change in the community. Last month, I sat down with Peo Nathan, the founder and CEO of ComputerVault, a software products and technology services company.

Mr. Nathan just relocated the company's headquarters from Marlborough to downtown Worcester in the former Unum building. I asked Mr. Nathan about how ComputerVault got started, the problems their products can solve in today's marketplace, why they moved to Worcester, and what his future plans are for the company. Below are excerpts from the interview with Mr. Nathan, edited for length and clarity.

The company ComputerVault may only be a few years old, but you say the concept has existed for nearly a decade. What is that foundational concept which has guided the company's essential functions?

I fundamentally believe that technology should work for the end users. There are several companies in the marketplace right now that provide virtual desktops both on-premises and on the cloud. But users of those products are not satisfied with those products' limitations and performance, despite their high costs. By "limitations," I mean ease of use and the ability to impose security.

When an IT department implements virtual desktop infrastructure, because of the lack of performance and ease of use, the users stop using them. They go back to their laptops and PCs because the virtual desktop just doesn't meet their daily working needs. When that happens, all the advantages of deploying virtual desktops in the first place go out the window.

ComputerVault's proposition is that our virtual desktop works like a PC. End users adopt them as their primary computing device because ours allows for productivity. It's easy to connect to their work PC—which is a virtual desktop—from anywhere. This ultimately meets the IT department's end goals of adopting virtual desktops: security, ease of managing end user devices, and providing support.

What inspired you to officially launch the business in 2019?

I had an IT consulting firm of my own for many years. For the past decade, we've been working to solve the problem of easing both the deployment of network infrastructure through software-managed networks and high-performing virtual infrastructure. We had arrived at a marketable ComputerVault virtualization software product by then and decided to turn our focus fully on selling the product.

Also: once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur! The freedom to operate and innovate is hard to give up as long as one has the resilience to stay the course.

Cybersecurity obviously played a key role in launching our product, especially because we've been seeing so many security breaches, phishing attacks, scams, and other threats in recent years. We believe our Virtual Desktop solves several major problems for the IT departments supporting businesses, hospitals, government agencies, and the like, by offering an unmatched opportunity to our customers in protecting and managing their data.

Although the cloud enables customers to get out of managing their infrastructure, it also exposes them to risks of public cloud data breaches, as well as the inability of knowing where their data is truly stored and how to protect that data. ComputerVault obviates those risks by deploying and remotely managing the ComputerVault deployment at customer sites.

And that timing worked out well. Just months later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. How did this impact ComputerVault, if at all?

I think the most important thing for any entrepreneur is to see that there is a blessing in disguise in everything. Every challenge opens new opportunities.

We took the time of the COVID lockdown situation to really refine our business model by developing OEM partnerships with the largest manufacturers of hardware such as Intel, Dell, HPE, Lenovo, and Extreme Networks, and certifying those hardware platforms to work seamlessly with our ComputerVault software.

Remote working technologies, including virtual desktops, were key to survival for business and nonprofits in peak COVID-19 times; they'll continue to be a critical part of the workforce as we know it, given the work-from-anywhere remote models employers are adopting. I believe that ComputerVault's virtual desktops can be the key ingredient to building a remote and productive workforce globally.

You've said publicly that part of what makes Worcester so attractive to you as a business owner is the presence of several higher education institutions. How will that benefit ComputerVault? And what else sparked your move to Worcester?

Access to next generation talent from several of the local colleges was an important factor in our move to Worcester. I want to contribute to the effort of city leaders to keep these students in Worcester after graduation and not lose them to Boston or elsewhere. I want to create a pipeline of talent from the community colleges. I don't believe talent only comes from four-year college degrees or from brand-name schools. Talent is personal and comes from all places and all backgrounds.

Over the next three to five years, I want to develop incubators of new technolo-

gies centered in and around Worcester.

I had my consulting company in Worcester at 446 Main St. several years ago. I had to move out east due to technical constraints, especially datacenter and technology lab needs. I'm happy to be back in Worcester because I always thought it's a great place to do business. Coming back felt like coming home.



Although you work in computer science and IT now, that wasn't always the case. Holding a master's degree in chemical engineering, how did you transition from that field to this one? Is there any overlap in the two fields?

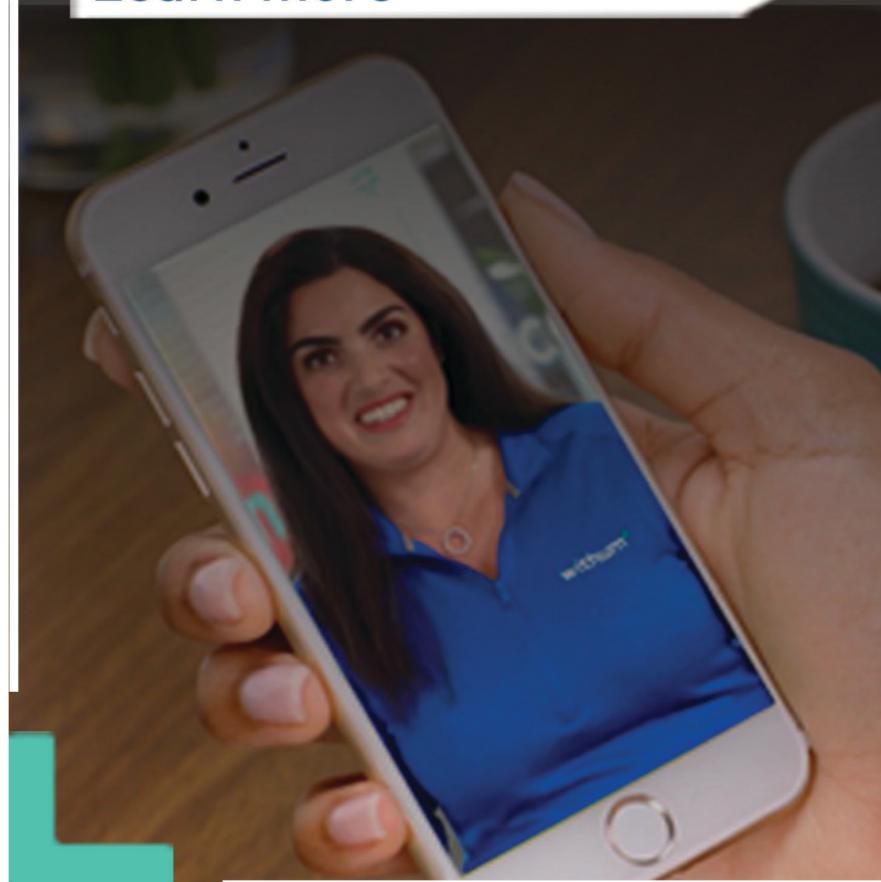
I came from India in 1991 to get my master's in chemical engineering at the University of Lowell—now UMass Lowell—where I met my lovely wife. I did some good work in materials science while at UMass and worked for a couple years as a research engineer, but, feeling unsatisfied at work for several reasons, I made the switch to IT because of my fascination with data management and computers, and due to a lack of jobs in the industry at the time.

As I always say: "Computer science is not rocket science. Everybody can do it." It's hard to become a functioning chemical engineer from being a computer programmer. But you can definitely become an IT professional or computer programmer after being a chemical engineer.

The benefit of having the degree in chemical engineering is that it helped me think outside the box. Every day, engineers design and develop outstanding technology and sometimes get carried away with all the cool things it can do. But all that matters is utility in the real world. To be adopted as a successful technology, the invention has to solve a major problem that the end users or businesses experience and at a cost that's economical. That is the foundation for ComputerVault. ♥

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Local Animal Shelter Aims to Support 45,000 Pets in 2022

SECOND CHANCE WORKING WITH TECH STUDENTS TO PROVIDE VET CARE

by MONICA SAGER, CORRESPONDENT

Over the past two years, our news feeds have been bombarded with cute photos of quarantine puppies and kittens. These pets, however, have often fallen behind on basic vaccinations and routine care as the pandemic has increased challenges for owners and veterinarians alike.

Now, Second Chance Animal Services—with locations in Southbridge, Springfield, Worcester, and North Brookfield—is hoping to help a record-breaking 45,000 pets this year through adoption, spay and neuter services, veterinary care, community outreach, educational programs, training, and its pet food pantry program.

“We usually have a full schedule of towns to visit each spring, vaccinating hundreds of pets at a time,” said Sheryl Blancato, Second Chance’s CEO. “We were able to hold a few last year, but many pets are falling behind on critical vaccines that protect them from rabies or parvo.”

The organization typically supports 40,000 animals each year, so the goal of 45,000 is “not out of the realm of what we think we can accomplish,” according to Second Chance’s Development Director Lindsay Doray.

“We want to be there and make sure that everyone has access to care,” Ms. Doray says. “That’s what we do because we know that’s how we can keep pets in their homes and out of shelters to begin with.”

Ms. Doray said that a lot of times animals are being surrendered to shelters because unexpected medical expenses come up and people do not have the funds to take care of them. She mentioned that the pandemic increased the risk for these unanticipated animal needs due to unforeseen circumstances like the passing of a caretaker, loss of a job, or even just the risk of going out in public.

“By providing access to care, that is how people are able to maintain the medical care for their pets through different programs that we have to do,” Ms. Doray said. “We need to be proactive in addressing the root cause of those issues. In doing that we’re making sure that those animals don’t need to be in the shelter or in the adoption process.”

Second Chance hosts weekly vaccine clinics at its hospitals, and the organization is currently working to set up a schedule of town vaccine clinics. The dates and locations will be announced soon.

With four hospitals and an adoption center, Second Chance hosts numerous programs within the community including Homebound to the Rescue, where they send a mobile clinic to low-income senior housing and offer free wellness examinations.

According to Ms. Doray, “About 1,800 or so come in through adoption. The rest is through our hospitals, through our vaccine clinics, through our low-cost spay and neuter surgeries [...] What’s unique to us is that our hospitals are full service.”

When it comes to surgeries, Second Chance takes care of them before the animals are adopted out. It not only helps the animals, but also the people whose homes they are joining.

The organization continues to support homeless pets in Massachusetts and from overcrowded shelters in the south. Many southern shelters are reaching full capacity and rely on places like Second Chance to help at-risk pets to find their forever home.

“We’re taking those animals from areas where they’re overwhelmed and over capacity and do still have needs,” Ms. Doray said. “By taking them out of there, we’re alleviating some of that pressure and some of those issues.”

In other words, these animals in other shelters need support and care, but in many cases wouldn’t receive it if it weren’t for Second Chance Animal Services.

The nonprofit animal welfare organization is also looking to its newest Community Veterinary Hospital in Southbridge as a key tool in helping them achieve their goal. Second Chance’s Southbridge Community Veterinary Hospital and Bay Path Veterinary Educational Center opened last November at 700 Worcester St.

“Like all businesses, we’ve faced staffing shortages,” Ms. Blancato said, “but we are excited to welcome some new recruits.”

The building, which formerly held a Jehovah’s Witness center, has been renovated partially by students at Bay Path Regional Vocational Technical High School in Charlton, and the facility continues to serve as an educational hospital through Second Chance’s partnership with Bay Path.

About 20 students are selected to study in the program, in which they learn veterinary and animal science. The opportunity allows the students to be “first-day ready” for employment after graduation.

“They do the course work but they also get hands-on experience working alongside our vet techs,” Ms. Doray said. “Some of them may choose to go straight into the workforce after high school, and they have some hands-on experience that would be very important for them getting into the field. Or, they can use it as a stepping stone and become a certified vet tech, or take it further and become a veterinarian, but to have this is great for the community because it’s a community in need.”

Ms. Blancato said that despite the rising costs of pet care, their nonprofit hospital subsidizes veterinary expenses for clients who qualify. Ms. Doray added that Second Chance is piloting that program, and it ensures that people can get the services they need for their pets.



Above: Second Chance Animal Services is on a mission to support 45,000 pets in 2022. Photo courtesy of Second Chance.

As an engagement center, Second Chance also uses the space for educational outreach and training programs. The animal services organization has made clear they’re committed to doing what they can to expand capacity in 2022 and support pets in need.

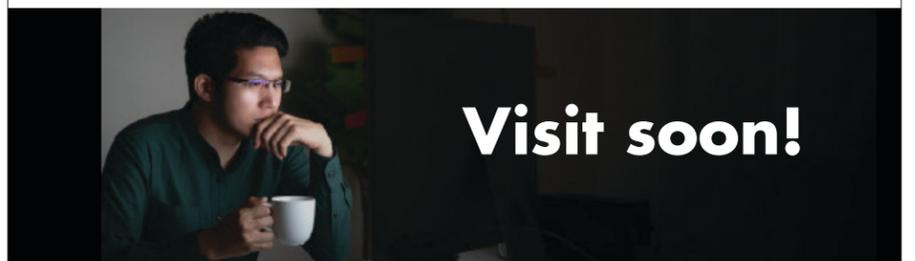
“We know there are many more pets who need help,” Ms. Blancato said. “We can’t let these pets down, but we can’t do it alone.”

Those wishing to help can make a gift at secondchanceanimals.org/donate/ or checks can be mailed to Second Chance Animal Services, P.O. Box 136, East Brookfield, MA, 01515. ♥



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FAMILY GROUNDS, CONTINUED

the former factory at the time got to know Hamid and his brother, and told them he'd like to sell them the building.

Since making that purchase in 2012, Hamid's continued to grow his real estate portfolio, acquiring several commercial properties over time. He eventually downscaled the Family Pharmacy business (which is now just one location: Prescott Pharmacy) and morphed it into Family Grounds, Inc. Today, Mr. Mohagheh owns about 13 acres of land in the Gateway Park neighborhood, housing 70-plus businesses across the Grove Street and Prescott Street properties. The only properties he doesn't own are 108 Grove St. and the space occupied by Rainbow Furniture.

NEELU RETURNS

Despite all this growth and professional success, for Hamid, "Money doesn't mean anything." Rather, the main thing that matters to him is family. "I adore my children. My whole energy comes from my children."

And in his family, the apple certainly doesn't fall from the tree. His 26-year-old daughter, Neelu, mimics her father's entrepreneurial spirit.

A graduate of Boston University with an artistic eye and a passion for creating, Neelu's career landed her in the music industry, doing digital marketing and advertising for event venues and working as a music journalist—that is, until the COVID-19 pandemic left her furloughed and with extra time on her hands to ponder the future of her profession. Out of work, she moved from L.A. back to the east coast to be with family.

But the Worcester she came home to wasn't quite the same as the Worcester she left behind a few years back. "Worcester had changed so much since I was little and I was like, 'Dad when did all this happen?!'" she recalled. "[I started] realizing Worcester has a lot going on for itself."

She began helping her father out with the Northworks Building and the business, and he started showing her everything he'd been working on, sharing some of his plans for the space's future. "I really thought it was cool and that he was onto something," Neelu said. "I told Dad there could be something in his building that could bring the community together, be a gathering spot and epicenter."

As someone who used to "coffee shop hop" all through college and grad school, loved to explore cafés wherever she went, and even worked as a barista at one point, Neelu envisioned transforming part of her father's Northworks Building into a coffeehouse.

Hopeful he could convince his daughter to stay in Massachusetts instead of moving back to the west coast, "I told Neelu this would be a great opportunity for her to, from the ground up, really be involved in the business and learn the real parts of it," Mr. Mohagheh remembered.

MAKING MEANINGFUL MEMORIES & SPACES

And "real" it was. From construction and project management to design work, Neelu quickly learned that being an entrepreneur and starting something from scratch isn't for the faint of heart. She took charge of the buildout transforming part of the bottom floor at 100 Grove St. into the coffee shop of her dreams.

"It's been such a journey," she said transparently. "It's really, really hard. I know people say that all the time, but now being in it and actually tackling it full-on, I see why they say it."

Renovating an historic building from 1831 certainly isn't a walk in the park. And doing it as a budding entrepreneur in the midst of a global pandemic didn't make it any easier, but, "I've never been afraid of hard work," she said. "I think I learned that from my dad. We're in there with everybody. There's nothing that's below or beneath us. I'm so thankful for a great role model like him."

While on the hunt for the perfect coffee beans and distributors for the new shop, the Mohaghehs happened to come across Fuel America's owners, who expressed their dream of franchising. Right away, Neelu knew that their Grove Street project was the perfect space for Worcester's second Fuel America location. "It already has the industrial vibe. We can bring energy to it, bring modernity to it," she thought, saying she also loved the Fuel America menu and how they roasted the coffee themselves.

According to Neelu, the former factory's brick walls, exposed air ducts, and loud pipes just add to that authentic, Industrial American theme which the Fuel America brand was founded on. "It's all part of the charm," she said.

Outside the shop, the unearthed cobblestone, string lights, planters, murals, and fountain all set the ambiance for a "European village," as she describes it.

Reflecting on her career in the entertainment industry, Ms. Mohagheh said: "I always loved hosting events and putting on something that would create experiences and memories for people. That was always my goal. I was hoping I could build something that, when people left that event or space, they could remember it because they had an incredible time."

LEAVING A LEGACY

Within the next three to six months, the Mohaghehs plan to open a small market next door to the café which will offer grab-and-go items for locals. Neelu also wants to start hosting more music shows, programming, and pop-up shops with local small businesses inside the Fuel America. "As Worcester continues to grow, we can be a part of that growth," she said.

Hamid, who's taken great joy in seeing through his vision of restoring these gorgeous, historic buildings for the city, says what they've done in the area so far is just the start. "It's all about giving back. Especially for my city that has helped me in every way. [...] My passion [is] for leaving a legacy behind for my city and as a tribute to my three children who were born here, and to all the greatness I've achieved in life here." he said. "This is just the beginning of it." ♥

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FOOD HUB Move to Union Station Fully Funded; Diverse Food Entrepreneurs Course Underway

by DAVID SULLIVAN,
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
& BUSINESS RECRUITMENT
ASSOCIATE

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce is proud to support the Worcester Regional Food Hub as its fiscal sponsor, helping the nonprofit with its finances, grant-writing, and project management. Lately, the Food Hub has been bustling with two major initiatives that are currently underway.



Above: Congressman McGovern speaks at a press conference in Union Station announcing the Food Hub's expansion project is fully funded. Photo by Dominique Goyette-Connerty.

UNION STATION PROJECT FULLY FUNDED

On April 14 at Union Station, Senator Edward Markey, Congressman James McGovern, and Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito announced \$3.5 million in new funding to help the Worcester Regional Food Hub build a shared kitchen facility in the lower level of Worcester's iconic intermodal transportation hub.

The capital mostly comes from a \$3 million appropriation from Congress, spearheaded by Rep. McGovern with support on the Senate side from Senators Markey and Elizabeth Warren. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts kicked in an additional \$500,000 in a Food Security Infrastructure Program grant.

This funding puts the Food Hub well over its \$3 million target for the capital fundraising efforts, which began in 2020. The new federal and state money complements \$1 million from the City of Worcester, which was allocated for the Food Hub late last year out of the city's discretionary American Rescue Plan Act stimulus. It also builds on a \$100,000 state grant from MassDevelopment and \$100,000 in matching funds from The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts. This funding is currently being utilized for architectural design and site preparation for construction.

The Health Foundation provided the Food Hub with operational funding between 2015 and 2021, before the Jack and Kathy Shields Family Foundation stepped in this year to provide operational support.

All told, the Food Hub has raised about \$4.7 million in capital for Union Station from local, state, and federal sources.

The new Union Station facility will be the Food Hub's permanent headquarters. About 6,000 square feet of empty storage space will be transformed into a state-of-the-art shared commercial kitchen that can support six food businesses at a time, a multipurpose space, a lofted office space, and ample cold and dry storage. The facility will also have a retail kiosk for locally produced food, some of it produced right in the shared kitchen. The public will be able to access this retail space as well as the multipurpose space for events and classes.

"The Food Hub's new facility at Union Station will bring a wealth of new opportunities for supporting food entrepreneurs, local farmers, and our work to support disadvantaged and food insecure populations in the City of Worcester," said Food Hub Director Shon Rainford. "With help from the Chamber, our fiscal sponsor, as well as the funding from local, state, and federal government, we will bring the region's food hub into the region's transportation hub."

"All the funding is here," said Congressman McGovern during the announcement last month. "This is a reality, this is going to happen."

Construction is expected to begin later this year and continue through mid-2023.

DIVERSE FOOD ENTREPRENEURS PROGRAM LAUNCHES

In 2021, the Food Hub was awarded a grant from the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation (MGCC), a state agency focused on helping entrepreneurs and small businesses. The nearly \$200,000 grant is currently funding a 10-week program to help launch 24 minority-owned food startups.

DINING ALFRESCO ACROSS WORCESTER

by SARAH CONNELL SANDERS, CORRESPONDENT

work, live, and play in three different Worcester neighborhoods, each one with its own alfresco options to explore. As soon as the weather turns, I love taking leisurely lunches outside. Here are a few of my favorites to help usher in the summer months:

WORK: GREENDALE CORRIDOR

I would currently classify myself as very pregnant. Nevertheless, my present state does not preclude me from socializing with friends and colleagues. (Although, it does make me more exacting when it comes to selecting a local brewery to patronize.) Greater Good's addition of non-alcoholic beer to their repertoire has propelled them to the top of my list. I'll be honest, the Millbrook Street haunt used to intimidate me on account of their catering exclusively to the imperial style which ranges from 8% to 14% ABV. The introduction of sessionable brews along with a staunch pro-dog policy has warmed me to Greater Good over the last couple years. There's nothing like the real thing, but non-alcoholic "nana" is a fine alternative—a juicy patio beverage paired with pretzel bites, perfect on sunny afternoons after work.



Above: Greater Good's non-alcoholic "nana" beer. Photo by Sarah Connell Sanders.

LIVE: WEST SIDE

Some little girls dream of living in a Parisian palace or a Manhattan penthouse. Growing up, I always fantasized about living in one of the historic homes on Worcester's west side. My dream finally became a reality just before the pandemic when my husband and I purchased our first house. West Side Steak & BBQ is a stroll-worthy destination in our new neighborhood, known for its pulled pork sandwiches, St. Louis spare ribs, and roasted chicken. Don't worry about the mess; outdoor tables abound along with plenty of fascinating people watching will keep you entertained.



Above: An array of BBQ bites can be enjoyed outside at West Side Steak and BBQ. Photo by Sarah Connell Sanders.

PLAY: CANAL DISTRICT

I spend a lot of time in the Canal District wandering around the Worcester Public Market, shopping at The Haberdash, and attending WooSox games. Lately, my favorite spot to grab a quick bite is the Ghanaian-inspired food stall, Ākra Eatery & Juice Bar. Ākra Eatery is the brainchild of Holy Name grad, Emmanuel Larbi, who also owns Accra Girls on Grafton Street. Originally from Ghana's capital city of Accra, Mr. Larbi and his family moved to Worcester in 2003. "By spelling Ākra Eatery with a 'k' we are trying to break the mold," he told me recently. "We put everyone on common ground by creating a fusion between West African food and a Western world approach." I highly recommend the Jollof rice bowls which are customizable, delicious, and travel well. The Worcester Public Market has plenty of picnic tables outside so you can enjoy your fresh eats with a side of fresh air.



Above: Ākra Eatery & Juice Bar can be found in the Worcester Public Market in the Canal District. Photo by Sarah Connell Sanders.

Do you have a favorite spot for outdoor dining in your Worcester neighborhood? Find me on Instagram at @sarah_connell and let me know where I should go next. ♥

StartUp Worcester Alum Supports Jamaican Students Through Nonprofit Org

by KEVIN SALEEBA, CORRESPONDENT

PORTLAND, JAMAICA - After delivering much-needed chairs, books, and laptops to children in the rural parts of Jamaica, Racquel Knight was moved to tears.

"I don't tell everybody this, but after I interact with the children, I go home and I cry," she said during a Zoom interview from Jamaica. Ms. Knight is the founder of One Child Foundation of Auburn, a former StartUp Worcester cohort member. When I spoke with her in April, she was in Jamaica for her One Chair 4 One Child crusade that has donated more than 600 chairs and desks to Jamaica's schools since 2017.

"Yes, I will go and cry because for me it's just ..." she paused for a moment to collect herself, took a breath and smiled: "There is a lot that I've been through in my life as a person, and I've reached a place where I'm blessed enough to where I can give back to these kids. Just seeing the smiles on their faces and the way they get excited when they see these chairs or see the books and even just getting a laptop for them, it's ... it's ..." She paused again, but not to hold back tears—her eyes glowed as she thought about helping the kids. "It's just like an amazing feeling. So, yes, I usually go home and cry, but I'm just thankful and grateful to help."

Ms. Knight experienced these educational hardships first-hand. When she was a young Jamaican girl, she attended similar schools. She used to walk several miles to-and-from school each day just for the opportunity to learn. "By the time I got to

school, the classroom was already full. There were no chairs. There was no place for me to sit ... And I had to stay at the door to get my work done. I'd stand in the back of the class and put my book on the wall and press it there to work."

In order to get an education in those days, she said, you had to fight for it. "When I talk to the kids about my experience, I try to be humorous and tell them sometimes I had to throw punches to just get a chair. They laugh, but you do what you got to do to learn."

Not all students have the passion to walk miles to school like Ms. Knight did. "I did whatever it took to get that education," she said. "If I have to walk for miles to get to school, I'm still gonna get there. Unfortunately, not everyone has that same mindset. Once they reach a certain age, the simple frustration of going to school and trying to find the basic needs to learn tends to steer a lot of kids to do something else." She said many kids will go into agriculture or drive cars for work, but, "they won't finish their education and this usually happens especially in the rural parts."

As a result, Ms. Knight's mission for the One Child Foundation is to provide comfortable learning environments for kids in Jamaica's rural and remote schools. She started the program as part of a school project while a sophomore at Becker College in 2015. With the help of StartUp Worcester, a program of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce designed to incubate and accelerate startup compa-



Above: Racquel Knight's (left) One Child Foundation provides much-needed chairs, books, and laptops to children in rural Jamaica. Photo courtesy of Racquel Knight.

nies in Central Mass, her organization has grown. However, her job is far from done. The problem of overcrowding and the lack of educational resources still persists, she said. "There are classrooms made for 30 students that are packed with double the children. These hardships on a child can hinder the learning process."

To help the children, Ms. Knight welcomes volunteers for fundraisers and to work at the thrift store in Auburn. For more information, visit the For One Child website at www.foronechild.org; email at info@foronechild.org; or call at (508) 963-5960. ♥

Applications for the 2022-2023 StartUp Worcester cohort are available now. Visit WorcesterChamber.org for more info and to apply.



What Leadership Worcester Taught Me

by KATHERINE AGUILAR, OWNER OF KOMMON SENSE CO.:
LEADERSHIP WORCESTER '22



As we wrap up Leadership Worcester Class of 2022 and I reflect on the past eight months, I've learned so much about myself and this wonderful city I've called home for the past 26 years. As CEO of K Sense CO., this program was an investment for sure—both in time and money!

I knew I wanted to further my impact in the Kommunity, so I checked with my mentor and Leadership Worcester alumna Giselle Rivera-Flores. With her encouragement, I applied and was accepted into the Class of 2022. I'm so thankful for everything this program has taught me.

"Being introduced to the various nonprofits, partners, and local leaders fighting to make an impact in our diverse city has opened my heart and mind."

Being introduced to the various nonprofits, partners, and local leaders fighting to make an impact in our diverse city has opened my heart and mind. I have learned how to advocate for myself and the Kommunities I am a part of (Salvadoreñas, immigrants, small business owners). I've gained meaningful connections within my class, been mentioned in rooms full of opportunities, and most importantly:

placed myself in spaces I was once made to believe a brown girl that grew up in Worcester's Main South neighborhood didn't belong in.

The monthly sessions have covered education, urban sustainability, public health, arts and culture, and more. As a participant, you meet local experts, activists, educators, city councilors, parents, and students; you're presented with current issues and work with your Leadership Worcester classmates to organize real change. Members of our class have organized call banks for our local election, joined subcommittees and executive boards for a wide range of causes in Worcester, and put together programming for youth—just to name a few things. I know we all would have done these wonderful things eventually, but by pushing each other, sharing resources, and having the support of program leaders Karen and Nancy as well as all our session presenters, we've

been making effective changes at a much faster pace!

I encourage small business owners, artists/creatives, BIPOC, and LGBTQ community members to apply. I also strongly encourage our top city employers to invest in this program to better support marginalized community leaders.

Lastly, I'll leave you with a quote that resonates with me: "The most valuable possession you can own is an open heart. The most powerful weapon you can be is an instrument of peace." - Carlos Santana. ♥

Applications for the Leadership Worcester Class of 2023 are due May 30, 2022. Find them online at LeadershipWorcester.com.





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The Worcester Jobs Fund (WJF) is always recruiting for no-cost, short-term job trainings which prepare participants for high-wage positions in high demand! Examples of upcoming trainings include Commercial Driver's License (CDL Classes A & B), Environmental Remediation, and Building Pathways Pre-Apprenticeship.

WJF also provides scholarships for eligible Worcester residents to take other career training classes through Worcester Public Schools' Night Life Continuing Education program.

**For more info, please contact Anh at
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The Worcester Chamber is proud to partner with Worcester Jobs Fund, Worcester Night Life, & the MassHire Central Region Workforce Board.



FOOD HUB, CONTINUED P17

The entrepreneurs in this cohort come from a wide range of backgrounds. Some have experience as cooks at restaurants and are now looking to start their own business, others have no formal experience in the food industry and are looking to turn a hobby or family recipe into something full-time. From Ghanaian to Venezuelan to Mexican and German, many different cuisines and cultures are represented.

The entrepreneurs attend eight weekly courses that teach them the basics such as menu planning and ingredient costing, but also more nuanced aspects of running a food business like marketing, online presence, finances, and production scaling. All participants have access to the Food Hub's shared commercial kitchen and a membership to the Chamber of Commerce, all paid for with the MGCC grant funds. They have also received their ServSafe food safety certification and wholesale permits. Thanks to the grant, the program is completely free to the participants—the grant even pays for them to each receive some funding to use at their discretion on startup costs.

The participants graduate from the program on May 16 in a ceremony at Greendale People's Church, where the Food Hub is currently located. After that, they will still be able to utilize the shared kitchen and attend pop-up events put on by the Food Hub for as long as they need it.

This program is a "reboot" of a previous program run in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce. In 2019, the Chamber received an Urban Agenda Grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development. The Baker-Polito Administration was instrumental in ensuring that the Food Hub received funding for this "Launching Diverse Food Entrepreneurs in Worcester" program, which offered weekly classes and technical assistance to a dozen minority, immigrant, and refugee entrepreneurs.

The Food Hub has high hopes for graduates of its current diverse food entrepreneur program in terms of creating successful food businesses in the Worcester area. Just recently, the Chamber and Food Hub celebrated the ribbon cutting of Mint Kitchen & Bar, a new Vietnamese restaurant which graduated from the first iteration of the diverse food entrepreneur program in 2019. Trang Le, co-owner of Mint, is an immigrant from Vietnam and ran a Vietnamese cuisine catering business with her family before renovating the shuttered Blarney Stone bar on Maywood Street and opening Mint.

Nadine James is another graduate of the 2019 program. Ms. James is a native of Jamaica who came to the United States and started a Jamaican food restaurant here in Worcester after graduating from the Food Hub. Ms. James' Unique Café was recognized with the 2021 Minority-Owned Business of the Year Award by the Chamber. She was also recently named to the Chamber's board of directors. ♥

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Forging Her Own Path: Haddad Grows Spice Co. from the Ground Up

By **MONICA SAGER**, CORRESPONDENT

From the time she could walk, Alicia Haddad has been playing and experimenting with recipes. At a very young age, she began cooking, baking, and canning in the kitchen with her grandmother, Leta. That bond between family and food flourished into what would eventually be the foundation for Ms. Haddad's own business.

Over the years and by process of elimination, Alicia became aware of her varying intolerances to many products containing high levels of gluten, sodium, sugars, dyes, anticaking agents, and bone char. These allergies, sensitivities, and strict dietary needs made it hard to find spice blends she could use when cooking.

Recognizing this void that existed in options for flavorful and healthy seasoning blends on the market, she embarked on a journey to become the solution to her own problem—which she figured must be a problem for many others, too.

In June of 2015, Ms. Haddad founded Alicia's Homemade, a spice company with the mission to provide recipes that are healthy, wholesome, all natural, gluten free, kosher, keto, vegan, and low sodium.

"I wanted to create and manufacture products that were different and far superior to other brands. No hidden ingredients, no hidden agenda," Ms. Haddad said.

Now, almost seven years later, the independently owned and woman-owned spice manufacturing company has recently undergone a brand refresh, with a name change to Alicia's Spice Co. and the introduction of all-new packaging and label designs. Ms. Haddad's branding can be described as fun and colorful, as evidenced by the bulbs of garlic, peppers, and tomatoes decorating the packages. Of this vibrancy, Ms. Haddad says: "It's just a pure reflection of who I am in my core."

"What the consumer sees on the packaging is exactly what they are eating. Never will you find anything artificial, nor potentially harmful additives, dyes, or ingredients you can't pronounce," she explained.

As rebranded companies tend to say: it may be a new look, but it's the same great taste. And those fundamental values which inspired her to launch the company in the first place are still at the forefront of her work and products every day.

Ranging from Garlic Chive, Southwestern Herb, and Dill Onion Herb, to Espresso Rub, Creole Seasoning, and much more, the Alicia's Spice Co. product line is expansive.

The products are currently sold at a number of locations across Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Local spots include the Worcester Public Market at 160 Green St., Maker to Main at 328 Main St., and Julio's Liquors in Westborough. Alicia also sells the products on her website: aliciaspiceco.com, and is currently onboarding with three major grocers and two distribution companies. Since 2015, she's been selling wholesale and at farmers markets, fairs, and festivals.

"It's very emotional to know that this has been my dream since I was a kid," she said. "It's surreal. This started as a little girl with a spoon and a dream, and now here I am."

But that doesn't mean that it was an easy path to her success. In manufacturing, Ms. Haddad said, it's hard to be a female entrepreneur: often hearing "no," regularly being the only woman in the room, and feeling she always had to prove herself in order to be in those meetings dominated by men running manufacturing facilities.

"It was extremely hard to get to where I am today. I was told "no" so many times in my life. I just keep pushing forward," she said. "Sitting in a room full of men and being asked, 'Who do you work for?' and, 'Who owns your business?' ... It's like, 'I do.'"

According to Ms. Haddad, a lot of her success is thanks to a relentless determination, coupled with a strong support system cheering her on. From customer feedback to the encouragement of organizations like Samuel Adams' Brewing the American Dream team and the Center for Women and Enterprise (CWE) staff, third-party supporters have all pushed her and reassured her she has a seat at the table.

The more she grew, the more determined she was to prove that women have a place in the manufacturing world. The "no's," Alicia says, only made her try harder.

"Never give up on your dreams. If you're providing a product or service to someone that no one else is doing, or you're finding a way to do it better or streamline the process, then don't give up," she said. "If people tell you 'no,' that doesn't mean you should walk away. Use that doubt as fuel."

Ms. Haddad believes that this type of entrepreneurial spirit can be sparked in many people, and that, at any point, someone with a dream can start a company—no matter what level of business experience they may or may not have. "If I can do it, anyone can do it. I've built this company and continue to learn as I go," she said. "I think that if I didn't have a few deeply influential people in my corner saying 'you can do this,' then it all would have been a lot harder."

On top of a forthcoming community-centric effort with local youth for a 'Spice Art' program, Ms. Haddad is actively involved in the Central Mass communities where she's doing business. She's served as a keynote speaker for the CWE's Women Who Lift Up the World, and as a guest speaker for business classes at Clark University and MassBay Community College. She also spends time teaching and mentoring young entrepreneurs, as well as donating to several local organizations close to her heart.

Alicia was honored as the 2020 Entrepreneur of the Year by the Worcester Chamber. That same year, she was named the Entrepreneur of the Year by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Worcester Business Journal named her to its 40 Under Forty Class of 2021, and she was also chosen as a Brewing the American Dream Pitch Room Award Recipient for 2021 by Samuel Adams. Most recently, the CWE awarded her the Andrea C. Silbert Rising Star Award 2022.



Above: Alicia Haddad holds up product samples to show her brand's refresh from Alicia's Homemade (right) to Alicia's Spice Co. (left). Courtesy of Alicia's Spice Co.

"It means everything," Ms. Haddad said. "Just being able to look back at all that I have accomplished. Becoming a state-, nationally- and federally-accredited woman-owned business, seeing the recognitions and awards I've received, and forging [this path] on my own—it means everything. ♥"

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CMS Chamber Offers May Networking & a June Car Show

by **JACK STARKEY**, COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST, CENTRAL MASS SOUTH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Recently moved to its new location at 3 Arnold Road in Sturbridge, Rapsallion Pub has maintained its inviting rustic ambience while adding the new flair of a full bar and kitchen. Enjoy Rapsallion's hand-brewed beer, great company, fresh bites, and the warm and friendly vibes offered by one of Massachusetts' favorite brewpubs at the Central Mass South Chamber's Fun at Five networking event on May 17th! Everyone is welcome to join the Chamber, our members, and guests as we discover the new Rapsallion Pub! Thank you to our May Fun at Five Sponsor, Country Bank. Register for the event by emailing info@cmschamber.org or calling 508-347-2761. The cost is \$12 for members who pre-register, \$15 at the door, or \$20 for non-members. The Fun begins at 5:00 pm.

The Chamber and Harrington Auxiliary are teaming up for the very first Driving It Ho(l)me for Health and Education Car Show. The event will take place on the grounds of Oakholm Farm Estate & Brewing Company at 80 Lake Rd., Brookfield, Saturday, June 11. (Rain date: June 12). Do you own a cool convertible, jacked-up muscle car, or a transformed truck? Show off your wheels at this fun, family-friendly event. Touch-a-Truck? You sure can! There will be more than 50 fire trucks, police cars, and other specialty vehicles to climb on and take photos for just \$5 per family! Car registration is \$10. Spectators are FREE. Enjoy tasty treats from a lineup of food trucks, beers on tap, and music. Harrington's HOW van will be providing health-related materials. All proceeds will enable Harrington Auxiliary and the Chamber of Central Mass South to continue supporting health and education in their communities. Thanks to our Premiere Sponsor Lamoureux FORD and DJ Sponsor ColBro First Aid & Training. Details coming soon to the Chamber's website: www.cmschamber.org. ♥

New Chamber Member Greatest Hits Cannabis Opens in Dudley

by **JOE VILLATICO**, CEO, GREATEST HITS CANNABIS CO.

On Tuesday, April 12, Greatest Hits Cannabis Co. opened the doors of its first adult-use retail outlet in the old Ethan Allan mill at 35 Chase Avenue. Located in Dudley, the vertically-integrated cannabis company explores the long-standing intersection of music and cannabis. Greatest Hits has established a distinctive retail brand which they'll be introducing to the Massachusetts cannabis market.

Founded by cannabis industry veterans, Greatest Hits is building a full-scale cannabis cultivation and manufacturing operation in Dudley, and in the coming months, they'll open two more adult-use retail outlets in Taunton and Lynn. When the Dudley operation is fully built, it's expected that Greatest Hits will bring approximately 300 new jobs to the area. In addition to the retail outlet at the Chase Avenue site, Greatest Hits is building a 40,000 square foot cultivation area that will ultimately be expanded to 100,000 square feet of cultivation area (the maximum allowed under current regulations), as well as a 16,000 square-foot manufacturing facility that will produce extracted and edible products. The company's cannabis products are not only expected to supply their own retail locations, but will also be sold wholesale to other adult-use retail outlets in the Commonwealth. ♥

Please join us in welcoming Greatest Hits Cannabis Co. to the Webster Dudley Oxford Chamber and to our regional business community! You can check them out at greatesthitssc.com or find them on Instagram at [@greatesthitssc](https://www.instagram.com/greatesthitssc).

NAVIGATING YOUR FUNDING OPTIONS

by **JEANNIE HEBERT**, PRESIDENT & CEO, BLACKSTONE VALLEY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

PPP, EIDL, ARPA, LLRP, MGCC, REDO ... these are just some of the makings of an "alphabet soup" of funding opportunities. How do you know if you qualify and what option(s) is best for you and your business? Your chamber of commerce is your best resource for assistance in navigating the sea of grants and other forms of funding.

Now more than ever, funding for small businesses is readily available due to federal COVID relief dollars. It seems like every day we are notified of another opportunity. This is great news if you understand how to access these funds. Your chamber of commerce works diligently with partners in government agencies, quasi-governmental agencies, and state and federal departments and organizations to keep abreast of the latest and greatest opportunities as well as the rules and regulations to help you apply for your fair share.

There are many qualifications to consider before you start your application. First, you should consider your goals. Will this funding help you achieve what you want? Additional funds are a big help, but with it comes the responsibility of meeting the application requirements. You may have to submit your tax information, business plan, financial records, and apply for certificates from your state or local government—like a certificate of good standing from the Secretary of State or DOR departments, or a business certificate from your city or town. Moreover, you'll be required to fulfill reporting requirements to prove that you're doing the work set by the guidelines of the grant.

Who can help you navigate these muddy waters to put you on the golden path to funding? Your chamber of commerce, of course! If you're a member in good standing, your chamber can inform you of opportunities that fit your needs, answer questions you may have, connect you with the experts you need to obtain the data required, offer letters of support, and even assist in filling out and filing your applications.

You can't put a price on the importance of this Chamber membership benefit! ♥

Auburn Chamber's Annual Meeting Features Airport's Andy Davis

by **AUBURN CHAMBER DIGITAL MARKETING COMMITTEE**

The Auburn Chamber of Commerce hosted its 60th Annual Meeting on April 12 where Andrew Davis, director of the Worcester Regional Airport (ORH), served as the keynote speaker. Mr. Davis became the airport director in 2008 after a 26-year career with American Airlines. He oversaw Massport's acquisition of the airport in 2010, and celebrated JetBlue's first Worcester flight in 2013.

Mr. Davis highlighted the \$100 million of private and public investments made in various airport improvements including runway and taxiway resurfacing, a new Rectrix fixed base operator building and hangar, and the addition of a category III landing system allowing airport operations in nearly any weather conditions.

These upgrades have allowed Massport to lure additional service from Delta and American, which now offer daily flights to New York's JFK and LaGuardia airports. Passenger numbers flying out of Worcester jumped from a little over 14,000 per year in 2013 to 194,065 per year in 2019.

As was the case for the entire travel industry, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Worcester Regional Airport hard. All carriers suspended service in 2020. However, most service has since been revived, and Mr. Davis and his team are working to get JetBlue to restore the daily Orlando flight; discussions continue about additional 'hub' service to places like Chicago and Washington, D.C.

As service returns, so has ORH's economic impact in the Central Mass area. Mr. Davis shared that the airport generates \$96.7 million in annual economic output. According to him, the "catchment area" of the airport reaches about 2 million potential passengers, and ORH is realizing just 2% of that market.

In addition to the physical airport upgrades as well as new and renewed marketing efforts including billboards along major routes, partnerships with Discover Central MA and the WooSox, and a social media strategy, the airport's major focus is adding more airlines, destinations, and passengers. ♥



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♥ Sports st

WooSox Kick Off Second Season; Pirates Defend Championship Title; Railers Just Barely Miss Playoffs; Bravehearts Get Creative

by KEVIN SALEEBA, CORRESPONDENT

Despite COVID restrictions impacting the start of the season, the Worcester Red Sox (WooSox) generated a lot of excitement during their inaugural year. They finished 20 games over .500 and ranked sixth out of 120 minor league teams nationwide in game attendance (362,559 fans).

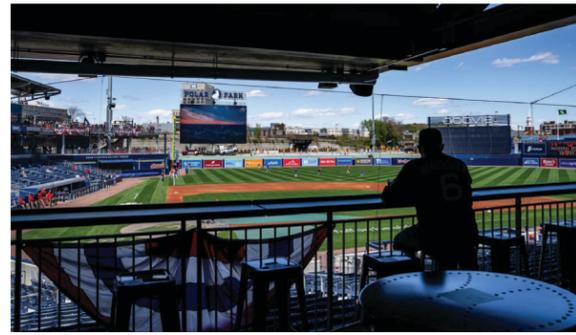
Adopting the maxim, “What’s cool and new in ’22,” the club was not about to become complacent. The WooSox hired a new manager, implemented more fan-friendly events and activities, upgraded ballpark amenities, and welcomed new talent to the roster.

NEW SKIPPER

The WooSox hired eight-year minor league veteran Chad Tracy as their new manager. He spent the last seven seasons coaching in the Angels’ organization. Baseball is in Tracy’s blood. His father, Jim, spent 11 seasons as a player and another 11 as a manager with the Dodgers, Pirates, and Rockies. His grandfather, Jim, Sr. and his brothers Brian and Mark, all played professional ball. According to the front office, it’s this experience that makes Tracy a good fit as manager.

“At this stage, [a manager] deals with players who have either been in or on the verge of the big leagues,” said WooSox Senior VP of Communications, Bill Wanless. “One of the key things for a Triple-A manager is to know how to communicate to those guys. He can relate because he was on that cusp. He played several years in Triple-A.”

Tracy played in 1,090 professional games, batting .265 with 169 home runs and 733 RBI, while compiling a .986 fielding percentage at first base. He managed three seasons in A-ball and four years as a field coordinator for the Angels.



Left: The WooSox’ second season is underway at Polar Park. Courtesy of the WooSox.

“He’s got a good background and he’s definitely a people person and a great communicator,” Wanless said. “I think fans are going to enjoy him.”

NEW & RETURNING PROSPECTS

Last season, fans saw the emergence of outfielder Jarren Duran, who displayed excellent power and speed. He finished with 16 home runs, 36 RBI, and 16 steals in 60 games. Duran will start in Worcester, but could be called up to Boston for another stint in the majors before season’s end.

“He probably didn’t do as well as he wanted to in Boston (after being called up) last year,” said Wanless. “But he’ll get another chance [...] It was his first experience. He sure did well for us.”

Joining Duran are several talented prospects. They are: Connor Seabold (1-0, 1.23 ERA, 9 Ks, 14.2 IP); pitcher Bryan Mata; Josh Winckowski (1-0, 2.70 ERA in two starts; Zack Kelly (35 Ks in 23.1 IP for the Sox; first baseman Tristan Casas (38 career minor league HRs, including four home runs this season); and shortstop Ryan Fitzgerald (5 HRs, 14 RBI, .333 BA with 42 Abs).

WHAT’S NEW AROUND POLAR PARK

Outside:

- Pickett Plaza on Green Street will welcome fans entering the ballpark through Gate A at Fallon Health Square.
- Summit Street’s “A Taste of Worcester,” presented by Masis Staffing Solutions, will open with local restaurateurs serving fresh delicacies.
- Sherwood’s Diner on Summit Street will feature pre-game broadcasts and visits from ballplayers, mascots, and special guests.
- Wormtown Brewery will be offered at “Beantown Betty” on Plymouth Street.

Inside:

- A new 22 ft. high by 39 ft. wide video board has been added on the Worcester Wall in right field to enhance the experience for fans on the third base side.
- New seating and standing options were added, including high-top tables and chairs and a duck boat in left field
- The Yuengling Flight Deck 34 will bring 34 fans closer to the action along the fence in right-center field.
- The Triple Decker Garden will offer seating for groups of up to 60.

EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

As part of Minor League Baseball’s three-year partnership with Marvel Entertainment, the WooSox, sporting Black Panther uniforms, will play their “Defenders of the Diamond” game Sunday, August 7.

In partnership with the late Tyler Trudell’s family and the Tyler’s Teammates program, the WooSox Foundation will raise money for equipment and registration fees of local ball players this season.

The Care-A-Van, presented by Bank of America, will be out in the community to deliver food, clothing, and other supplies, as well as provide space for job readiness support, medical services, and other forms of aid.

DEFENDING CHAMPS KEEP WINNING

Massachusetts Pirates’ rookie quarterback Mike Glass, filling in for starter Alejandro Bennifield (illness), helped the Pirates defeat the Iowa Barnstormers 36-22 on Phoenix Field at the DCU Center (April 23). Glass ran for a touchdown and threw for four more to secure first place in the IFL Eastern Conference. As of April 29, they improved to 4-1 and are poised to repeat. The Pirates are looking to defend their IFL championship title this season.

WORCESTER RAILERS MISS PLAYOFFS

Despite a strong season, the Worcester Railers Hockey Club fell short of the ECHL playoffs, placing tenth with a final record of 32-32 in April. Captain Jordan Smotherman was still a bright spot for the team; he ranked ninth in the league with 30 goals. The offensive winger found success with a strong net presence, especially during the powerplay and sports a lethal shot. Smotherman did play a game for the Springfield Thunderbirds in the AHL and scored a goal. At time of writing, it’s unclear if he will return to Worcester next season.

JERSEY CHANGE

The Worcester Bravehearts announced they’ll become the first team in baseball history to change uniforms in the middle of a game based on the score. In partnership with Mezcal Tequila Cantina, the Bravehearts will debut a Rally Jersey at home games for their 2022 season; the entire team will change into this jersey if losing after the 7th inning. ♥

Mark your calendars for July 14! The Worcester Chamber is hosting a member appreciation night at the Bravehearts game, with a sweet deal under the tent of their craft beer fest. Visit worcesterchamber.org for details and to register.

Drivers Wanted!

Check out these TWO golf tournaments we're hosting this summer!

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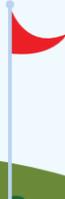
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9 Ways to Celebrate Worcester's 300th



by **MONIQUE MESSIER**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DISCOVER CENTRAL MA

Worcester Tercentennial hits peak celebration mode June 10th through June 12th and you won't want to miss out. Here are nine opportunities to partake in the weekend festivities:

1. KICK-OFF THE WEEKEND WITH A CANAL DISTRICT STROLL

FRIDAY, JUNE 10TH, 6PM

Head to the Canal District for a Stroll through local shops and the Worcester Public Market. You'll find special deals and giveaways across the whole neighborhood!

2. SEE RICKY DURAN & FIREWORKS AT POLAR PARK

FRIDAY, JUNE 10TH, 8PM

After, head to Polar Park for a national anthem performance featuring Ricky Duran, The Voice's season 17 runner-up, followed by a spectacular fireworks show. Admission to Polar Park is free but requires tickets. Reserve yours by visiting the WooSox Ticket Office or calling (508) 500-8888

3. WALK OR RUN THE TERCENTENNIAL 5K

SATURDAY, JUNE 11TH, 9AM

Walk or run a 5K course through Downtown Worcester and the Canal District Saturday morning. Course details and the link to register can be found on WorcesterTercentennial.com.

4. WATCH THE TERCENTENNIAL PARADE

SATURDAY, JUNE 11TH, 11AM

Worcester welcomes the Tercentennial Parade down Main Street, which promises to showcase our city's diverse, local flair. Cultural groups will offer unique displays of identity, with the likes of Guardians of Traditions, Worcester Caribbean American Carnival Association, Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts, and Shrewsbury Street Italian Heritage Parade. Worcester Railers HC, local dancers, and bike groups will also entertain onlookers.

5. EAT & SHOP AT THE TERCENTENNIAL FESTIVAL, HOSTED BY START ON THE STREET

SATURDAY, JUNE 11TH, 12-5PM

The parade concludes in front of city hall, where you'll find 150 vendors gathered for the Tercentennial Festival, beginning at noon. Food trucks, dozens of artists and crafters, and live entertainment will ignite the day with music, dancing, and creativity for all celebration-goers.

6. ATTEND A COMPLIMENTARY CONCERT

SUNDAY, JUNE 12TH, 4PM

A culmination of elation hits the stage with the Tercentennial Concert: Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra with Special Guest Brian McKnight. Although free, tickets are required, so secure your GA admission to the DCU Center ASAP through Ticketmaster—the link is at WorcesterTercentennial.com.

7. CATCH A WORCESTER BRAVEHEARTS GAME WITH THE FAMILY

SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 4PM

If you've got kids in tow, consider a Worcester Bravehearts game instead of the concert. The 'Hearts play the New Britain Bees at 4pm, and their games are always a blast for the whole family! Another reason kids love Sundays at the Bravehearts: they can run the bases after the game—it's a home run experience!

8. SHOP THE SWAG

Not in town that weekend? You'll miss the festivities, but you can still sport your city pride by repping limited edition Tercentennial items from Worcester Wares!

9. TELL YOUR FRIENDS!

The more the merrier! This isn't just for locals! Tell your friends from out of town to join you and bask in the glow of a community coming together to honor this historic, once-in-a-lifetime occasion.

FYI: FREE PARKING & TRANSPORTATION

The city is pleased to offer free parking in municipal lots and garages downtown for patrons attending any Tercentennial events. Additionally, the WRTA's fare-free program continues, making the events accessible to all. Public transportation is highly encouraged. ♥



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HOW TO RETAIN & ATTRACT EMPLOYEES IN TODAY'S WORKFORCE

by **MATT VACCARO**, PRESIDENT, MASIS STAFFING SOLUTIONS



In today's job market, many companies are experiencing challenges in finding and hiring individuals who are qualified and well-suited for open positions. While the degree of such difficulty obviously varies by industry, it's fair to say that every business at some time will experience a challenging recruiting environment.

Another side of the equation, however, concerns your ability to retain talented people already on your staff. It's a key question: How can I—as a business

professional—ensure that my staff is happy and satisfied, so that I can minimize the risk of their migration elsewhere?

Here are several strategies that can prove helpful in retaining valued employees:

ENGAGE EMPLOYEES

All of us want to feel that we have a voice. As an employer, it's a matter of letting your staff members know that the proper channels and forums are in place and readily accessible for them to be heard. Consider the ease with which employees can communicate with colleagues and managers across your organization. Are there any existing negative perceptions about intra-company communications? For example, do employees feel there is a corporate culture that inherently discourages the airing of concerns or grievances? The onus is on the employer to make employees feel valued—and that means reassuring them of their ability to participate in and affect their unique development, growth, and maturation as business professionals.

SHOW EMPLOYEES THEY'RE VALUED

It's human nature to want positive reinforcement and acknowledgment. With your employees, keeping them motivated in large measure rests on your ongoing recognition of their contributions and achievements. Money is not always the answer. There are many other ways to demonstrate your appreciation. For example, do you regularly notify the entire company or specific departments about the accomplishments related to a specific employee? Do your managers demonstrate active, ongoing, positive communication, celebrating exemplary efforts or significant milestones with their staff? Do you help individuals enhance their skills and personal growth through initiatives like paid training, certification programs, or continuing education courses?

RECOGNIZE THE UNIQUENESS OF EACH INDIVIDUAL

We all have personal lives and varied interests outside the office. To what extent do you support your employees in this regard? For example, do you allow employees to take time off to participate in acts of goodwill and volunteerism? Do you offer flexible hours or remote-work opportunities to help families with young children?

BE COGNIZANT OF YOUR CORPORATE CULTURE

...As well as your corporate perception and reputation. Do you sustain a work culture that allows employees to be proud of their association with it? Is your company known to honor its responsibilities to the local community, including educational institutions, public service organizations, and the arts & culture community? Do you consistently promote employee diversity? Do you have formalized processes and procedures that foster and facilitate a healthy work culture in both mental and physical respects?

MONITOR YOUR COMPANY'S PRIORITIES

Solid revenues and bottom-line numbers are essential for business success. However, make sure to never minimize the importance of a healthy work/life balance at all levels of your company. We all need to regularly "recharge our batteries" to continue performing at our highest levels. Don't ever forget the age-old expression: Your employees are your most valuable assets. Without them, your company will not be successful.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE ROLE EACH EMPLOYEE PLAYS IN THE COMPANY'S SUCCESS

Sure, there is no "I" in "team." Yet success results from the actions of individuals performing well in their day-to-day jobs—and constantly encouraging and helping their colleagues to do likewise. Ensure they understand their contributions matter. This enables your employees to have an appreciation for the significance of their roles.

If you're looking for a staffing company with over 25 years of experience in the employment industry, Masis Staffing Solutions provides unparalleled service. Contact us today to learn how our team of experts can help you find the perfect position or candidate! ♥

Savvy Self-Storage Solutions for Every Season of Life

by **LAURA SWEET**, GENERAL MANAGER, 10X SELF STORAGE



In 2020, dramatic shifts in how businesses operated drove changes in network infrastructure for both large and small companies. As you've probably experienced, many of these changes took place without adequate analysis of security impacts because they needed to happen so quickly.

Do you have an abundance of goods, gadgets, games, and more? You're not alone. Plainly put: Americans have a lot of stuff. Our living and working

spaces can become overrun with these extra things, but we only have a finite amount of real estate. As a result, one industry that has grown nationwide is self-storage.

Storage is something we all may need at some point in our lives, whether that need is unprecedented or part of a larger plan. Renovating your house, downsizing, decluttering, moving, taking in family members, selling a home, and going to college far away are just a few of the scenarios where self-storage may come in handy.

SEASONAL STORAGE

Most uses for self-storage are seasonal and temporary. Preparing your home to be staged for a real estate sale, but some of your favorite belongings aren't suited for the listing pictures? Have a car you usually park outside, but prefer to keep in a garage over the winter? Lose a friend or family member who's left behind a household of things, but loved ones need some time to sort through everything? Have no attic or basement, but love to change seasonal decorations for every holiday? Have yard tools, but no storage shed or garage?

Many self-storage facilities operate on a month-to-month lease basis, allowing you to stay for the short or long term—whatever is convenient for your unique situation and needs.

PREPARE YOUR GOODS TO BE STORED

If storing for six-plus months, ensure fabric items are well-sealed in plastic. Ziploc and other companies make storage bags you can vacuum the extra air out of to make more space in the boxes you're storing in. Wrap fabric/upholstered furniture with moving blankets and shrink wrap/pallet wrap, especially if storing in a non-climate-controlled unit. Condensation happens; keeping your items sealed from the changes in humidity is crucial for long term storage.

The cement floor of your unit is a good thing. Don't put a tarp or plastic sheeting down—it can trap water that may fall from leaks, neighbor's mistakes, or shifts in weather. This is particularly true in an outdoor, drive-up, non-climate-controlled space. If you want to protect your things from a cement floor, use wooden pallets to create a false floor; this gives items some protection from rising waters and the collection of falling water or condensation.

Storing fine art, antique furniture, or electronics in a non-climate-controlled space can degrade these items and is not recommended. Even if stored in a climate-controlled unit, take the extra precaution of tightly wrapping items in moving blankets and again in shrink wrap/pallet wrap. Photography, especially negatives and slides, needs to be protected from moisture; adding silica gel packets in can help.

SELECT A LOCATION BASED ON YOUR NEEDS

Many people prefer to use a storage facility as close to their living/working environment as possible, allowing them to keep their belongings within comfortable reach.

Choosing between climate-controlled and non-climate-controlled units will largely depend on what goods you're storing. Drive-up, non-climate units can let dust in, so you're better off not keeping more delicate items in this type of unit. But if you do, be sure to seal things up really well in airtight packaging to keep the fine dust out.

CARRY INSURANCE ON YOUR GOODS

Like most things in life, there is no guarantee everything as we know it will be here tomorrow. We can select an excellent facility and prepare our goods for safe keeping, but things still happen. Many storage companies require their users to have insurance on their stored goods, and all offer special insurance policies which often have better coverage for pest protection and flood protection/water damage.

No matter what you're storing or where, stick to this short checklist to keep things easy: choose a facility, pack things well, check insurance policy, arrange transport. Need help figuring out how self-storage solutions can simplify your life? Give us a call at 508-459-6900. ♥

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Strike out hunger with Fallon Health and the WooSox!

Fallon Health—the Official Health Insurance Founding Partner of the Worcester Red Sox—is once again proud to sponsor the Strike Out Hunger campaign. We will contribute \$50 to the Worcester County Food Bank for every home game strikeout thrown by the WooSox this season—with a guaranteed season goal of \$50,000!

Fans can help strike out hunger, too. At every Fallon Family Funday Sunday home game, the WooSox, Fallon Health and the Worcester County Food Bank will be collecting non-perishable food items to help Strike Out Hunger.

Fallon Health is committed to improving health and inspiring hope in all the communities we serve.

