

North Central MASSACHUSETTS

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Public Policy Agenda

FY2019

Advancing North Central Massachusetts

Approved by the Board: September 20, 2018

As an organization, we are committed to advancing North Central Massachusetts by promoting and leveraging **economic competitiveness** with our state, region, and nation; advocating on behalf of **small business**; asserting our role as the Commonwealth's hub of **manufacturing**; and appreciating that we cannot do any of this without innovative and leading **education** strategies and a strong **transportation** infrastructure.

This document is intended to serve as the guideline for the Chamber's government affairs efforts, and has been reviewed and approved by the Government Affairs Committee and the Board of Directors. Adjustments and additions to these policies will be made as necessary.

Please contact Christopher McDermott at 978.353.7600 ext. 224 with any questions you may have regarding this Public Policy Agenda.

Economic Competitiveness

At the heart of the Massachusetts economy is innovation. To remain competitive, this region must aggressively advocate for the tools and resources necessary to lead locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. As we work to strengthen our emerging sectors and clusters, we must recognize our strengths while addressing our weaknesses.

Regional Equity

Our position relative to I-495 should not make a difference in how we are viewed by state government. We will call on Beacon Hill to increase investments outside of Greater Boston. As we position ourselves to be the next growth region, we need partners throughout the Commonwealth to change the way they view communities in our region.

Public Infrastructure

Essential to any regional economy are the public resources which all businesses rely upon. As one of the Commonwealth's oldest manufacturing hubs, many of North Central Massachusetts' roads, utility mains, drainage systems, and electrical lines are in need of repair or improvement. To this end, the Chamber will support efforts at both the municipal and the state levels to address these needs in a timely fashion.

Broadband and High Speed Internet

Emerging sectors rely on technology now more than ever. Ensuring that all areas of North Central Massachusetts have access to high speed internet is a priority. We will continue to aggressively advocate for increased access for underserved areas in the region, and call for parity with the rest of Massachusetts.

Property Tax Rates

Since the inception of Proposition 2 ½, local governments have faced challenges when it comes to balancing budgets. Growing the commercial tax base should be a priority of every local government. Presenting business friendly environments through single property tax rates will continue to be a priority. Neither residents nor businesses should be overburdened by taxes, A single rate creates a fair and balanced environment for local receipts.

Investments in the Public Promotion of Tourism

North Central Massachusetts is home to a burgeoning tourism and travel destination. An evolving market has ushered in hundreds of millions of dollars in private investments over the last several years, positioning North Central Massachusetts as one of the highest growth regions in the Commonwealth. To propel that momentum, we need to continue to encourage investments and partnerships at the state and local level.

Regulatory Reform and Streamlined Permitting

In order to recruit businesses to our region while retaining and supporting those presently here, we must encourage state and local government to reduce regulatory burdens and make it easy for businesses to open. Permitting and red tape should be eliminated where possible and "speed-to-market" strategies should be embraced by local government.

Small Business

Affordable properties and a market that embraces local shopping present North Central Massachusetts as one of the last places in the State where owning a small business is feasible. We must continue to embrace small businesses as the heartbeat of our economy, and remove any roadblock that impedes success.

Minimum Wage

Significant increases in the minimum wage place business in Massachusetts at a severe competitive disadvantage. Ultimately, higher payroll costs will drive shoppers to e-commerce outlets, eliminating jobs and compelling small retailers to shutter. Sunday Premium Pay drives the starting wage for retail employees to \$16.50 an hour on that day– forcing many businesses to close on Sundays, decreasing payroll and sales taxes to the State as a result.

Unemployment Insurance Taxes

Massachusetts provides laid-off workers with more generous benefits than any other state and ensures the longest duration period. It also applies the weakest earnings and time worked tests in the nation, significantly increasing costs for small businesses.

Micro-lending and technical assistance investments

Since the Great Recession, increased banking and financial regulations have left many small businesses without access to traditional bank and credit union capital. Supporting emerging businesses and entrepreneurs with important financing is therefore a priority for our region. In conjunction with its affiliate, the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporations, the Chamber will build partnerships with state and federal agencies that ensure credit and business counseling are available to those who need it. These activities are absolutely essential, as microlending helps open business that would be unable to under other circumstances.

Health insurance & health care costs

The cost of health care is a major detriment to economic growth in Massachusetts. Small business already struggle to afford coverage for their employees, and this expense continues to climb. We will fight hard for small businesses against increased rates, newly imposed benefits, and other costly mandates that make it difficult for a small business to best address the needs of its employees.

Energy costs

Massachusetts has the second highest energy costs in the contiguous United States. This continues to be an incentive for businesses to re-locate to other states and it is time we take an aggressive approach. We will therefore advocate for a diverse portfolio of power sources which includes wind, solar, and natural gas.

Manufacturing

North Central Massachusetts is home to the highest concentration of manufacturers in Massachusetts. The region's 445 manufacturing firms account for one fourth of its employment. Supporting careers in advanced manufacturing and fiercely advocating for our large employers will remain a major priority for the Chamber.

Removing the Stigma Associated with Manufacturing

As both students and parents think about career paths, manufacturing is often associated with dirty, unattractive work. Positioning ourselves at the intersection of manufacturing employers, K-12 school systems, and institutions of higher education, will enable us to advocate against the stigma associated with careers in advanced manufacturing and change the narrative too often associated with the industry.

Removal of the Inventory Tax

Reducing burdens that manufacturers face is what will keep these companies from off-shoring or moving out of Massachusetts. We will aggressively support the removal of the Inventory Tax, a tax that is prohibitive to growth and competition for our region's manufacturers.

International Trade and Tariffs

North Central Massachusetts' manufacturers produce goods and components that are shipped the world over. At the same time, import of raw materials from foreign markets is essential to the work these employers do. Maintenance of reasonable trade agreements which protect American interests without erecting unnecessary barriers to commerce is therefore critical to our regional economy. To that end, this Chamber will support efforts to update current trade agreements, implementing gradual changes which bringing them more in line with the realities of a 21st Century market, and strengthen consistent enforcement of those agreements.

Education

At the backbone of any successful economy is a state of the art educational framework. As we seek to be more competitive, we will support high quality education systems that align the strengths of North Central Massachusetts with workforce needs.

Support High Quality Education

With a commitment to our students' futures, we will support increased investments in education and extra-curricular activities that provide high-quality training and resources, ensuring they are equipped to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by a dynamic economy.

Aligning K-12 Curriculum with Workforce Development Initiatives

Ensuring our students are equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to compete in an adaptable workforce will be a priority. Our education system will be the fabric of our efforts as we look to advance the economy of North Central Massachusetts.

Transportation

The Route 2 corridor is poised to be the next area of growth in Massachusetts. Without transportation infrastructure improvements, we will be unable to expand our residential, commercial, or industrial tax bases. Advocating for transportation improvements, extended commuter rail access, and increased reverse commute options will be essential to ensuring growth.

Widening of Route 2

A two lane highway will not support the travel and capacity needed for economic expansion. Working with our transportation partners and state and federal governments, we will explore options for widening Route 2 to increased traffic.

Increased Transportation Options for Employees

In North Central Massachusetts, a job surplus is usually related to transportation access. We will advocate for expanded transportation routes and schedules that are conducive to shift changes and employee needs. Ensuring that employees are connected to public and alternative transportation will therefore be among our transportation improvement goals. Development of multiuse paths, such as the Twin Cities Rail Trail, provides another transit option many young professionals find highly desirable.

Roadway Improvements

Roads, bridges and other public ways have long been neglected. Maintenance and re-construction of these roads is imperative to remaining competitive as a region of growth.

Airport Improvements

The Fitchburg Regional Airport is a vital component of the local economy, employing hundreds, attracting clients throughout Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire, and supporting dozens of businesses that service it. The Chamber will support any efforts made to improve its services or increase its capacity. This includes updating its technology, expanding its runways, and decreasing barriers to business attraction.

While these statements are policy as of the effective date of this document, the Chamber reserves the right to adopt changes and make modifications and additions to its Public Policy Agenda, and will continue to monitor legislation and issues as they develop.