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north central massachusetts report

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CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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About the Cover:

For this edition of the Chamber Report we highlight the Chamber's commitment to advocacy efforts that benefit our members and improve our business climate. The Chamber has a strong record of success in engaging business and policy leaders and working collaboratively towards advancing the region's economy. The feature article starting on page 14 highlights our strong and dynamic program of work around government affairs and advocacy that helps connect, engage and influence. In this edition you will also find news and updates from the Chamber, highlights of our activities in the last quarter, a report on our tourism marketing efforts during the Winter, and so much more. As the old saying goes "A rising tide lifts all boats" – a thriving regional economy and business environment benefits your business and leads to a thriving local community. Thank you for your support. We hope that you enjoy reading the Chamber Report!

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Photo Caption: Pictured left to right in the picture are Travis Condon, Public Affairs Manager for the North Central Massachusetts Chamber; Mayor Stephen L. DiNatale of the City of Fitchburg; Roy Nascimento, President & CEO of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber and the NCMDC; Dr. Richard S. Lapidus, President of Fitchburg State University; and Joe Ferguson, Director of InTown Fitchburg.

GRANT PROVIDED TO SUPPORT POP-UP SHOPS

Approach for Artisans, Crafters, Entrepreneurs

The North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC), the economic development arm of the Chamber, provided a grant of \$10,000 as seed funding to the City of Fitchburg for the development of pop-up shops to provide temporary space for local artisans, crafters and entrepreneurs to sell their products to the community.

InTown Fitchburg worked in collaboration with the city to identify areas feasible for pop-up businesses, including vacant storefronts in the downtown area which have the potential to generate much needed economic activity for the properties and

“As we continue our work to revitalize the downtown area, we are excited to open up our vacant storefronts for our local small business owners to share their products with the community through this program.”

— Mayor Stephen L. DiNatale

interest in the storefront.

“A pop-up shop provides a tremendous benefit to the business owner while also helping to develop vibrant downtown areas,” said Roy M. Nascimento, President and CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. “This funding will help support the ongoing revitalization efforts of the downtown Fitchburg area by bringing together

local small business owners to share their work with the community.”

In addition to highlighting vendors featured in the pop-ups, placing pop-up shops in an existing business has the potential to attract a new customer base and could lead to future collaborations with featured vendors.

“As we continue our work to revitalize the downtown area, we are

excited to open up our vacant storefronts for our local small business owners to share their products with the community through this program,” said Mayor Stephen L. DiNatale, City of Fitchburg. “It’s always wonderful when organizations come together to create unique opportunities for our business owners, and through this collaboration with the city, InTown Fitchburg, the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation, and the property owners willing to participate in the program, we are able to provide spaces for local artists and entrepreneurs to grow their business while we grow our downtown.” ◇

Chamber Sponsors Welcome Signage at Leominster Connector

The Chamber sponsored the construction of a new welcome sign for the City of Leominster located on the Leominster Connector.

The new sign is part of a project to construct welcome signs at key gateways in communities in the region to boost civic pride and serve as a positive first impression for visitors. The project was partially funded by a grant secured by the Chamber.

The signs were designed and produced by Chamber member Add-A-Sign in Leominster and represent the region's traditional New England style. The Leominster welcome sign includes a carving of the City of Leominster's seal and is painted in the proud city colors of blue and gold. In addition to Leominster, similar welcome signs have also been installed at key gateways in Fitchburg, Gardner and Westminster. Each sign is carved with the community's seal and painted to match their official colors. Additional signs will be constructed for other communities in North Central Massachusetts as



Pictured left to right in the picture: Travis Condon, Public Affairs Manager at the North Central Massachusetts Chamber; Amanda Curtis, Economic Development Coordinator for the City of Leominster; State Representative Natalie M. Higgins of Leominster; Roy Nascimento, President & CEO of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber; Susan Templeton, District Director for State Senator John J. Cronin; and Mayor Dean J. Mazzarella of the City of Leominster.

funding becomes available.

"One of the goals of our regional economic development plan, One North Central, was to capitalize on our region's unique locations," said Roy Nascimento, President and CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce.

"Each city brings a distinctive experience to the region and with this project, those entering Leominster will learn about the city while receiving a warm welcome as they arrive."

"Leominster is truly a gateway city to the North Central Massachusetts region and the new signage will

serve as a great way to show our visitors what Leominster is all about," said Mayor Dean J. Mazzarella, City of Leominster. "We are proud of our heritage in Leominster, and we are grateful for the opportunity to share the story of our legacy through the welcome sign." ♦



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GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS UPDATE



In February, the Chamber hosted a legislative briefing for members of the North Central Massachusetts legislative delegation. Pictured left to right: Nolan King, Aide to Representative Jon Zlotnik; Elizabeth Kazinskis, Aide to Representative Ferguson; Travis Condon, Chamber Public Affairs Manager; Representative Margaret Scarsdale; Representative Meghan Kilcoyne; Senator John Cronin; Representative Kimberly Ferguson; Senator Jamie Eldridge; Representative Michael Kushmerek; and Representative Danillo Sena.

As the Massachusetts Legislature settled into the new session with a new administration, the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce continues to advocate and strengthen our relationship with the region's delegation on behalf of our members. Letters were sent to each of the newly elected officials in the region and statewide offices as well as those reelected. Chamber President and CEO, Roy Nascimento, also penned an open letter that was picked up by multiple media outlets thanking the Baker-Polito administration for their partnership and extending a welcome to the new administration. The letter included eight strategic recommendations for consideration to

advance the region and the Commonwealth. The Chamber is closely monitoring the executive offices, and we expect more transitions and appointments in the early days of Governor Healey's new administration.

While Beacon Hill prepares their priorities for the FY24 budget, the Chamber gathered the region's delegates from the House and Senate at the Chamber office for our annual Legislative Briefing in February. This marked the first time the event has been held in person since the start of the pandemic, and there was a strong showing from the North Central Massachusetts delegation. The Chamber gave an overview on successes in the past year and outlined our priorities for FY24 from the public policy agenda in the areas of small

business support, tourism and education and workforce. We also provided an update on progress made on a number of initiatives contained in our One North Central plan.

When it comes to the One North Central plan, the Chamber continues to work towards a number of initiatives from the plan including the implementation of a regional land bank. On this front, the Chamber worked closely with our delegation during the last session on a bill to extend the sunset date of the Fitchburg Area Economic Development Corporation (FAEDC) which expired in 2021 by another 50 years to 2071. The FAEDC was a predecessor to the NCMDC and the Chamber intends on using it as a vehicle for this land bank initiative. Special thanks to Senator

Cronin and Representative Kushmerek for sponsoring the legislation. We would also like to extend our thanks to Representatives Zlotnik and Higgins for their support.

One big topic of conversation during the prior legislative session and election cycle was the topic of tax reform. Despite releasing plans last summer, Beacon Hill opted not to enact any major tax reforms. During her campaign, Governor Maura Healey did indicate she would pursue permanent tax relief measures, and the Chamber will monitor this situation and its potential impact on the area's business community.

As part of our local advocacy efforts, Mr. Nascimento, and Travis Condon, our Public Affairs

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Manager, attended the most recent tax classification hearing in Clinton. A 2018 recommendation by a Select Board committee had advocated for shifting towards a single tax rate, a shift that was paused during the pandemic. Mr. Nascimento testified for the continued move towards a single tax rate, but multiple board members first made a motion to increase the split which was defeated. A similar motion to decrease the split also failed before members voted in favor of maintaining the current split. While this is not the outcome we had hoped for, we did reach out to thank



The Chamber hosted a legislative briefing for members of the North Central Massachusetts delegation to discuss legislative priorities and efforts to advance the regional economy.

the Select Board members who voted for the reduction, and we will continue to advocate for reducing the split in the coming years.

The Chamber is also working to continue to build our relationships with the towns throughout the region

and we have spent time since the beginning of the year meeting with various town administrators and economic development committees to discuss ways to strengthen our partnership and remind them that the Chamber is available as a resource. ♦

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact **Travis Condon**, the Chamber's public affairs manager, at **978.353.7600, ext. 224**; or via email at **tcondon@northcentralmass.com**.

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Tom Meyers Joins Chamber Team

The Chamber is pleased to announce the appointment of Tom Meyers as a Senior Marketing Advisor. In this part-time position, he will be responsible for assisting with marketing strategy, managing media buying and copy-writing for the Chamber and its affiliate organizations — Visit North Central Massachusetts and the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation.

Meyers comes to the Chamber with years of extensive marketing experience. He was the long-time marketing director at Wachusett Mountain Ski Area before semi-retiring in 2021. He



Tom Meyers.

continues to work in a part-time Marketing Advisor role at the ski area, as well. Tom is very familiar with the Chamber and our affiliate organizations, having partnered with us


in the past on marketing campaigns and having served in the past on the Board of Directors of Visit North Central Massachusetts. Tom has been a long-time advocate of statewide tourism, working closely with the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism and as chair of the Massachusetts Ski Areas Association Marketing Committee. He is also a past winner of MOTT's Legend of Tourism Award. Earlier in his career, he served as the Marketing Director for the Vermont Ski Association.

"I am excited to have Tom join our team. He will be a great help in supporting our efforts to promote our members and

the communities of North Central Massachusetts, particularly given our recent growth," said Roy Nascimento, President & CEO of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. "His experience, connections and industry knowledge will make a positive contribution to our efforts to advance the regional economy."

He holds a bachelor's degree in English from Hobart College. He has been a resident of Princeton since 1996.

Members can reach out to Tom at 978.353.7600 ext. 226 or via email at tmeyers@northcentralmass.com. ♦



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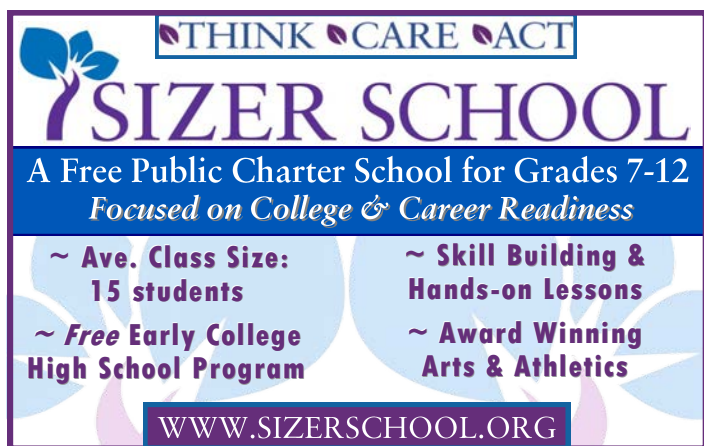
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CHAMBER UPDATES

EQUITABLE LENDING LEADERS:

The Chamber's economic development arm, the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC), participated in a 12-week cohort designed to provide equitable outcomes in our lending programs. Two of our team members worked through the cohort to connect with underserved populations, business owners, and resource partners to determine what changes or additions to our programs would help us provide more equitable outcomes for minority and low-income communities. The program ran from June to November 2022, and the team is now working on ideas that will help us reach our goals.

LATINX OUTREACH:

The Chamber and NCMDC have continued efforts to engage and support Latinx businesses throughout Central Massachusetts. Efforts have included providing technical assistance, referrals to different resources, and collaborating with the Spanish American Center. We have also advertised our services in the Spanish publication *El Vocero*, Facebook and LinkedIn.

REACCREDITATION:

As reported in our previous edition, the Chamber is currently in the midst of the five-year reaccreditation process. Chamber accreditation is an extensive, self-review process that is expected to

last six to eight months to complete. We hope to have our submission prepared for the Accrediting Board by the end of March and decision made by July. The Chamber can only earn reaccreditation by meeting rigorous standards for leadership, staff development, chamber policy and procedures, programs – including governance, government affairs, technology, planning and finance. Our Chamber is one of less than a handful of chambers in Massachusetts to have received accreditation. This exemplifies our commitment to excellence and to supporting our members and communities at a high level.

NEW LOANS:

The NCMDC has approved and closed 7 Small Business Loans for a total of \$286,500, since Oct. 1, 2022. Three loans totaling \$22,500 were approved and closed through the SBA Microloan program and the other 4 loans totaling \$264,000 were funded through our CDFI loan program. Four of the loans were granted to fund start-up businesses. New loan clients are finding NCMDC through our resource partners, banking partners and through the SBA.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:

During the last quarter, our economic development team provided 678 hours of direct technical assistance to existing and start-up businesses in the region. Several members of our team also sit on local boards within the communities

we serve, helping us stay informed on small business activities and various grants and programs available to our small businesses.



MINI-GRANTS:

The NCMDC continues to offer mini-grants between \$500 - \$5,000 to our borrowers to assist with technical assistance. Examples of professional services that the grant can help cover include accounting/bookkeeping, marketing, and legal services. Prioritization is given to existing loan clients but we will consider other small businesses in North Central Massachusetts with a demonstrated need. For the quarter, NCMDC has awarded 3 mini grants totaling \$8,178.69 for bookkeeping, marketing and signage assistance.

PODCAST SERIES:

The Inside North Central Massachusetts Podcast series has hit over 50 episodes, and is now releasing episodes weekly. Listenership has continued to grow over time. Since the launch, we have had over 1,000 downloads on Podbean; over 475 on Apple; and 81 on Spotify. We have been unable to determine downloads via Google Podcasts, but believe the numbers are strong via that

channel too. The Chamber has invested in podcast equipment including a sound board; four headsets; four microphones and stands. This has allowed us to venture out on the road with a new series from member locations called "On The Road". To date, we have visited over 15 members representing restaurants, retailers and more. In March we produced our first podcast in Spanish with Maribel Cruz stepping in as host. Thank you to all the members who have participated in interviews and/or listened to the new Podcast series.



TOURISM GRANT:

The Chamber's tourism arm, Visit North Central Massachusetts, is partnering with two of our neighboring regional tourism councils - the MetroWest Visitors Bureau and Discover Central Massachusetts - on a joint effort to promote our collective regions. The three organizations collectively applied for and were successful in securing a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration to support tourism marketing during the shoulder season. The grant will be split and used to help fund advertising campaigns over a two-year period (FY24 & FY25).

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This will be a nice boost to our existing marketing efforts and help to attract more visitors and groups.

STRONG ECOSYSTEM PROJECT:

A small advisory committee of members worked with our consultant, RKG Associates, to develop a strategic plan to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem for start-up and early stage companies in the region. The project builds off of the work of our One North Central Regional Economic Development Plan, which prioritizes efforts to grow the region from within through

small business support programs and initiatives. MassTech provided a small grant to help fund the development of the plan. We have submitted the final plan to MassTech and are awaiting word on if additional funding will be awarded to help implement the elements of the plan.

ACCOUNTING:

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, North Central Mass Chamber Foundation, Johnny Appleseed Trail Association (Visit North Central), North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation and Chambers Insurance fiscal year-ends closed smoothly. The

applicable Annual Audits and Tax Returns were processed and filed on-time and without incident.

HEALTH INSURANCE:

Effective April 2023, next open-enrollment, the Chamber will no longer administer Tufts insurance, as they transition to a brokered account through their merger with Harvard Pilgrim. All existing Tufts employer groups with more than 5 employees will be directly brokered through Harvard Pilgrim and all groups with less employees will be brokered through SBSB (Small Business Service Bureau) or transitioned out to our other carriers brokered through Chambers Insurance,

Inc. Our team has been working for several months with Tufts and SBSB to ensure a smooth transition of our Tufts subscribers without any interruption. We encourage any members who are impacted to contact us with any questions or concerns.

SOLAR PROGRAM:

From its inception in August 2014 through December 2022, the solar field on Pleasant St. has produced 12,036,466 kWh of Net Metering Credits to the manufacturers participating in the Chamber's program. The collective savings to participants totals \$2,308,424.87. ◇

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FEATURED MEMBER PROFILE

Gardner Ale House & Moon Hill Brewing Company



Gardner Ale House Owner, Rick Walton & Staff.

Fresh food, cold beer, a friendly staff and a great location are the main ingredients in the success of the Gardner Ale House, according to owner Rick Walton.

When asked what separates the Gardner Ale House from the competition, he noted, “Our food is prepared fresh, not frozen or processed and we make our own beer. Our staff is super friendly and our location in downtown Gardner feels like the center of action – a Main St. kind of feel.”

Founded in 2006, Walton’s popular establishment at 74 Parker St. in Gardner now employs 85 people and is a thriving part of downtown Gardner. He feels one of the most special aspects of doing business in

North Central Massachusetts is that customers don’t have to deal with large crowds or noises of the city.

“Our modest sized city is just right for our restaurant and the people in the area; some coming from a bit far away,” he said. “North Central MA is just more laid back. COVID didn’t hit us as hard as it hit the cities because of our lower population density and more spread out living situations.”

Walton noted the Ale House is very involved in many community activities.

“We pretty much involve ourselves in anything going on in the city (Gardner IS a city, by the way),” he said. “And the city and its organizations come to us for beer, food, donations of gift cards, senior center activities.

We pretty much do it all. And we put on the biggest party for the city called Oktoberfest & the Chair Luge. So much fun! The list goes on...”

While COVID may not have hit the Ale House as hard as other establishments, Walton still said it forced them to change how they operate the business.

“Customers are harder to come by so we have to become even more attractive than we already are,” he said. “That means more consistency with food and service. It means tightening our belts, reducing waste even more – getting the most out of every dollar. It means making it easier

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to get food for takeout. We need to be like the chains with takeout!”

Walton added they are improving lighting, music, furniture. “The whole vibe is nicer,” he said. “We were forced to take our already excellent restaurant and brewery and make it even better! And it is working, but it is a slow climb. The future looks bright because we are so much better than ever before.”

He also noted the Ale House’s staff is a very important part of why they are even better. “Everybody in the company is important and listened to. Condescending to another employee just doesn’t happen and is not allowed. We aren’t too serious: The culture is to respect each other, work hard and enjoy your job. We can’t be 100% in this, but we try. It might sound dreamy, but we believe

you shouldn’t be in a job you don’t like. So, our culture puts employees first. In that way, customers get the best possible service and experience.”

When he is hiring staff, Walton looks for “honesty, a good work

“Everybody in the company is important and listened to.”

ethic and a willingness to learn.” “If you can be like that,” he said, “we’ll teach you the rest!”

Word of mouth is a critical way for The Ale House to promote itself.

“We promote ourselves through our community involvement, through word of mouth, heavy use of social media and through collaborations

like the Brew Barn and Cidery at Red Apple Farm in Phillipston,” Walton added. “I think word of mouth builds our customer base reliably, but social media gets the word out to that base and that is critical. We also have a rewards program and a newsletter in which I am allowed to be a bit silly.”

Walton said he listens to everyone for ideas. “We casually take in the competition to see how they do things,” he noted. “We aren’t too proud to borrow! A very big influence is each other. So many people in this company have left their mark on us with ideas, methods and best practices.”

He concluded the biggest influence of The Ale House is the guests’ input. “Guest feedback is largely positive,” Walton noted, “which gives us the impetus to continue along our way and negative feedback is critical to improving our way forward.” ◇

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Advocacy in Action:

Promoting a BUSINESS Friendly Environment in North Central Massachusetts

One of the most valuable and often overlooked functions of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce is the role as the region's most powerful champion for the business community. The Chamber is uniquely positioned at the crossroads that connect businesses of all sizes and industries, non-profits, and local and state government to tackle the tough issues and get things done to ensure businesses can succeed and thrive in the region.

"I see our Chamber as both a respected facilitator and a strong networking hub," said Mark Freeman, President, SteelFab, Inc., located on Crawford Street in Fitchburg. "The Chamber staff advocate and facilitate movements in an effective way, and they are excellent at using their relationships within local and state government and in the community to get the right people to the right meeting so we can get things done."



State and local leaders tour a local manufacturer. Pictured are Mayor Dean Mazzarella of the City of Leominster; State Senator Michael Rodrigues, Chair of the Ways & Means Committee; and Senator John Cronin.

And Freeman should know. As a longtime business owner in Fitchburg, Freeman, along with dozens of other business owners, worked with the Chamber to achieve a single tax rate in the city of Fitchburg following years of daunting work with little progress. "We never really made a ton of progress over the years going from a split tax rate to a single tax rate, but

experienced incremental reductions," he said.

Following more than 30 years of fighting what Freeman called an "uphill battle," the Fitchburg City Council adopted a single tax rate with an 8-2 vote in 2019. "I believe we achieved this because the Chamber was very active to not only engage with candidates running for office, but by also then inviting the

candidates who won their respective seats to meet with us as business owners and hear our concerns. The Chamber really leaned into this for us, and I think this achievement is a huge development for the city and region."

Not only did the Chamber help facilitate discussions to achieve the single tax rate,

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Chamber President Roy Nascimento testifies at a meeting of the Clinton Select Board.



Mayor DiNatale of Fitchburg meets with a delegation of business leaders from the Chamber to discuss priorities.



The Chamber organizes numerous opportunities to connect members and elected officials. Pictured here (L-R) are Representative Michael Kushmerek; Chris Hendry, President of IC Credit Union; John DiNapoli of Unital; Governor Maura Healey; Roy Nascimento, President of the Chamber; and Worcester County District Attorney Joseph Early, Jr. at the Chamber's Legislative Reception.

Continued from page 14

which affected all businesses in the city, it also helps individual and clusters of businesses who experience a challenge and need some extra advocacy.

Take Crawford Street in Fitchburg, which is home to more than 20 businesses and some one-and-a-half miles of telephone pole wires, all of which did not provide high-speed internet services

commitment to help us.”

Freeman added that if the pandemic occurred when the former service was in use there likely would not be a business today. “Without the high-speed internet, we wouldn’t have been able to serve our customers by providing virtual inspections, use our systems and honestly just get work done, so we are happy to have the service and I know our neighbors on the street are happy about it as well.”

“They are excellent at using their relationships within local and state government and in the community to get the right people to the right meeting so we can get things done.”

until 2017. Up until then, businesses on this well-traveled road were forced to deal with unreliable and weak service which affected their operations and daily business tasks. “We really needed the high speed internet to make our businesses run smoothly, but we just couldn’t get it to work with our service providers,” said Freeman. “The Chamber reached out to Fitchburg Mayor Stephen DiNatale and other advocates to have the service providers take a fresh look at what we needed. In the end, Mayor DiNatale was able to help bridge the gap to obtain the service with the state and help us get the bandwidth we needed, and the Chamber never wavered in their

As Freeman pointed out, the Chamber is a “networking hub,” providing numerous opportunities through the year for members to come together at various events, forums and meetings. The goal with these programs is to make sure that members are informed and have a voice in the decisions that impact the communities in North Central Massachusetts. And, on occasion, the Chamber will also partner with other trade associations to advance an issue important to members or hire outside experts and commission studies on issues that impact the local economy and the future of the region, such as

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the current labor shortage.

In late 2022, the Chamber released a study, “Worker Shortages and the North Central Massachusetts Region: Engaging Hidden and Future Workers to Grow the Local Economy,” which was prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute’s Economic and Public Policy Research group, a leading provider of applied research to help clients make more informed decisions about strategic economic and public policy issues. Focusing on workforce growth challenges and solutions, the study outlines workforce barriers related to geography, skills, structure, and work-life balance, and includes short-, mid- and long-term recommendations for how to grow the North Central workforce.

“The study was intended to help shape public policy and advance thoughtful solutions to the labor challenges faced by our members,” said Travis Condon, Public Affairs Manager, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. “The challenges and issues are very complex and have long-term implications for the region’s future and our ability to compete for talent.” One of the recommendations requires all different community stakeholders in North Central to work together to meet the regions



A delegation of Chamber members meets with Senator Anne Gobi at the State House to discuss legislative priorities.

workforce needs.

“As manufacturing is such a huge percentage of our local regional employment base, I’ve worked with the Chamber to engage with high schools and other grade levels on providing opportunities to tour our facility, offer mock job interview experiences, and bring mini-trade shows to school cafeterias during lunch to help spark an interest in the field,” said Freeman. “We owe it to the students to know of the opportunities available to them and the Chamber does a great job of collaborating with local businesses, superintendents and guidance counselors to bring these opportunities to our students and ultimately, help us meet our workforce needs.”

“We owe it to the students to know of the opportunities available to them and the Chamber does a great job of collaborating with local businesses, superintendents and guidance counselors to bring these opportunities to our students and ultimately, help us meet our workforce needs.” — Mark Freeman

Freeman noted the Chamber’s WorkNorthCentral Jobs Board as another great resource for employers and job seekers alike. “This website offers a job seeker the opportunity to view any number of jobs at a variety of employers, which is helpful for us and for those looking for work.”

Tamar Russell Brown, founder of Sitka Creations, a graphic design studio in Shirley providing clients with creative and effective graphic and web design and visual communication

services, said she believes she would not be where she is today without the Chamber.

In addition to her location in Shirley, Russell Brown used to have a gallery on Main Street in downtown Fitchburg. The Chamber helped secure funding in concert with NewVue Communities to open the Gallery in 2016.

Upon opening her gallery on Main Street, she realized the sidewalk was uneven and needed repairs as many people in the older

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population were visiting the gallery and she was worried the sidewalk was not safe for her visitors. “I called the city and didn’t get the immediate attention we needed so I reached out to Chamber who helped get the issue resolved,” she recalled. “The Department of Public Works came out and fixed my sidewalk, so it really shows the power of the Chamber to help small businesses get what they need.”

When it comes to guiding its advocacy efforts, the Chamber only needs to look to its member-led Government Affairs Committee. This non-partisan committee meets to discuss local, state and federal priorities and is comprised of members from diverse industries. It is responsible for reviewing pending issues for their impact, developing positions and advising the staff and Board on programs that inform and encourage member involvement in its government affairs initiatives.

In addition to the Chamber’s highly popular Legislative and Candidates Reception held each fall before Election Day and an annual Congressional Luncheon which compliments the quarterly Good Morning North Central breakfast series, the Chamber offers opportunities throughout the year to bring together the region’s elected officials, and business



Local, state and federal officials joined members to celebrate renovations to the Johnny Appleseed Visitors Center, a project that was championed by the Chamber. Pictured (L-R) are Representatives Natalie Higgins; Meghan Kilcoyne; and Michael Kushmerek.

and community leaders to discuss topics that matter to them.

An active participant in many of the Chamber’s events, including a recent interview during the Good Morning North Central breakfast series, State Senator John J. Cronin has seen the work of the Chamber firsthand and the environment of collaboration to bring stakeholders from multiple areas together to achieve a common goal.

“From the North Central region to Beacon Hill, the Chamber is known for being an influential voice and an organization that gets things done,” said Sen. Cronin. “As a representative of several of the communities that make up North Central, I appreciate that my constituents have advocates at the Chamber engaging

with policy leaders who impact businesses on a daily basis, and I always have my door open to the Chamber to help make connections and build relationships to help our businesses succeed and thrive.”

And businesses are thriving. Russell Brown just celebrated her 20th anniversary in business. “The Chamber knows you and they are such a huge part of the community by bringing so many of us together for after-hours events and networking,” she said. “If you are a member of the community and not involved with the Chamber you would have no idea of the many opportunities that exist for you.”

“This Chamber is where the rubber meets the road,” said Freeman. “There’s a million things the Chamber

does, from resources for local businesses to help financing startups and they do it exceptionally well which is evidenced by the many awards and recognitions over the years.” In 2021, the Chamber was a finalist for “Chamber of the Year in the U.S.”

But, as Freeman adds, “We know we have one of the best quality chambers anywhere in the country.”

As a member, you have all of the Chamber’s resources and connections at your fingertips, and we encourage you to take advantage of that benefit and stay connected. If you have an issue or policy concern that you believe the Chamber should be aware of, please reach out to Travis Condon at 978.353.7600 ext. 224 or email him at tcondon@northcentralmass.co. ♦

TOURISMupdate

We wanted to provide an update on the work of our destination marketing arm, Visit North Central Massachusetts (VNCM), to promote the region to visitors and groups.

Revised Branding

Over the last quarter, we have refocused our marketing efforts towards highlighting the region as a seasonal destination and primarily utilizing digital strategies, with

some limited print. We have focused on new messaging highlighting our brand as “Everything you love about New England...a lot closer to home.” We are concentrating on encouraging our visitors to explore our region, instead of driving past it on Route 2, with the message “Travel to (not through) North Central Massachusetts.” This new strategy will focus on North Central Massachusetts’ convenient location to the southern New England metro areas of Boston, Worcester and Providence.

Marketing Strategy

As part of our marketing strategy, we continued with our efforts to create an assorted mix of strong content for our travel website – www.visitnortcentral.com – highlighting seasonal activities and local businesses. We added new seasonal landing pages; a section highlighting communities in our region; and a new landing page to help promote the region as a destination for youth and amateur sports tournaments and

events. Stories added to our website during the Winter season included “There’s “Snow” Time Like Ski Season!” which promoted the region as a ski destination; “They’ve Got Talent”, which showcased the local art scene; and “On Thin Ice,” which highlighted unique local ice out traditions in communities like Leominster and Hubbardston.

Advertising & Partnerships

We also invested in paid advertising campaigns; sponsored content with media partners to attract more visitors in the drive market; and in paid social media.

Our proposed media partners include MassLive, Local IQ, Cumulus, Trip Advisor, Visit New England, Hearst, Yankee Magazine, AAA and Boston Magazine. During the Winter, we also partnered with the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, the Massachusetts Ski Association and five other regional tourism councils on a collective winter dynamic digital campaign highlighting the state as a

Continued on page 19

VisitNorthCentral.com

Everything You Love About
**Winter in
New England**
.....
A lot closer to home!

Wachusett Mountain Ski Area
Princeton, MA

Travel to (not through)
North Central Massachusetts!

VISIT NORTH CENTRAL
MASSACHUSETTS
JOHNNY APPLESEED COUNTRY

MA MASSACHUSETTS
visitma.com

Paid digital advertisement that ran with several media outlets in target markets as part of our Winter campaign.

Continued from page 18

ski and winter destination. Likewise, we partnered with the Hampshire County Regional Tourism Council on an advertising campaign in the Boston Spirit Magazine. During the holiday season we also implemented some shop local marketing to promote supporting local businesses.

Visitor Guide

Our Spring/Summer edition of the Guide to North Central Massachusetts should be hitting newsstands in March. This popular publication is a glossy, full color magazine with pieces that aim to inform and inspire readers, and brand North Central Massachusetts as a unique destination and a dynamic place to live, work and visit. We have expanded the printing of this edition from 35,000 to 40,000 copies to better meet growing demand. Starting with this edition, we have also invested more in additional distribution sites.

The guide will now be available at more than 450 high traffic locations throughout the region and state, including 45 AAA offices and Logan Airport. A digital version will also continue to be posted on the website and



Digital advertisement that ran as part of our Winter marketing campaign.

shared via social media and email. Thank you to all the members who advertised in the Guide. The support helps make the additional investment in expanding the printing and distribution possible.

Social Media & Website Data

For the second quarter (October to December), our Visit North Central Facebook page had an organic reach of 252,737 and an additional paid reach of 291,714 and 1,074,284 paid impressions. During the same timeframe we also garnered 3,607 new followers. Our Instagram posts had a reach of 3,745 during the second quarter and saw an additional 76 new followers. Google analytics indicates we also saw a 9.53%

increase in visitors to our website from July 1 to December 31, 2022 when compared to the same timeframe in 2021. During the same time period we also had over 681,000 Google impressions.

Lodging & Visitor Data

Preliminary Arrivalist data from July 1, 2022 to December 31, 2022 indicates an 11% increase in visitors traveling to the region over the prior six months. Top four origin markets were Boston; New York; Providence; and Hartford/New Haven. Lodging data was also very strong for CY22. Smith Travel Research indicates that hotel occupancy was 69.9%, a 16% increase over the previous year; ADR was \$174.42 which is a 31.9% increase; RevPar was

\$121.89, a 53% increase over the previous year; total room revenue was up 53%; and rooms sold was up 16%. AirDNA data also showed that the supply of short-term rentals (vacation rentals) in the region increased 65% in CY22; demand increased 54% and revenues increased 61%.

Looking Ahead

For the remainder of the winter season and spring/summer/fall seasons, we are continuing to focus on promoting seasonal awareness and visitation to North Central Massachusetts. We will continue our past strategies of promoting the outdoor assets of our region, as well as other traditional New England attractions. People are looking forward to being outside after a long winter – we will provide itineraries of spring and summer adventures that are waiting for people to discover in North Central Massachusetts. We will do so through pivoting to a more digital focused marketing mix combining paid search, paid social, geofenced ads targeting the Route 2 corridor, digital display and sponsored content ads, print ads, targeted YouTube advertising, branded content and organic social media. ◇

QUICK hits



TOUGH STUFF CELEBRATION

The Chamber celebrated the expansion of Tough Stuff Recycling and the unveiling of their new logo. Tough Stuff Recycling offers on-site drop-off, municipality/solid waste facility pick-up, curbside pick-up, and retailer pick-up services of mattresses.

RIBBON CUTTING AT SIMPLY SWEET

The Chamber held a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for Simply Sweet by Christine Inc. to celebrate the grand opening of their location at 206 Merriam Avenue in Leominster. If you need to satisfy that sweet tooth, stop by the bakery!



GOOD MORNING BREAKFAST AT CHOCKSETT INN

The Chamber held the November edition of the Good Morning North Central Breakfast at the Chocksett Inn featuring guest speakers Che Anderson, UMass Medical School Assistant Vice Chancellor for City and Community Relations and Bruno Fisher, Administrator of Montachusett Regional Transit Authority.



Pictured (L-R) are Roy Nascimento, President & CEO of the Chamber; Lauren Howe, Principal of empHowered PR and Emcee of the November breakfast; Che Anderson; Tom Browne, Supt. of Montachusett Regional Voc-Tech; Chris McCarthy, President of Fidelity Bank and Chair of the Chamber's Board; and Bruno Fisher. Special thanks to Montachusett Regional Voc-Tech School for sponsoring the November edition.

QUICK HITS CONTINUED...



RIBBON CUTTING AT DIVINE TOUCH

The Chamber held a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for DivineTouch Home Health Care LLC to celebrate their grand opening located at 95 Vernon Street, Suite 301 in Worcester.

DivineTouch Home Health Care provides a holistic approach to care by providing a full range of services focused on designing an individualized patient plan of care to help those in our care achieve their best possible health – in the comfort of their home.

CHAMBER AMBASSADORS CELEBRATE HOLIDAYS

The Chamber Ambassadors Committee gathered for their annual holiday get-together at the IdeaLab at Fitchburg State University. They enjoyed breakfast and continued their annual Yankee swap tradition. We are so appreciative their hard work in supporting the Chamber and advancing our communities!



WINTER RECEPTION

Thank you for celebrating the season with us at our Annual Winter Reception. Thank you to our premier Sponsor AIS (Affordable Interior Systems) and The 228 in Sterling for hosting the event!

QUICK HITS CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

QUICK HITS CONTINUED...



DONATION TO JOHNNY APPLESEED CENTER

Thank you to Care Central VNA & Hospice, Inc. for donating an antique medical bag and stethoscope to the Johnny Appleseed Visitors Center on Route 2 in Lancaster! The items join our growing collection of historical and cultural items on display at the center showcasing the region's proud heritage. Pictured left to right in the photo at Kelly Fitzpatrick, Clinical Staff Educator at Care Central; Holly Chaffee, President & CEO of Care Central; Roy Nascimento, President & CEO of the Chamber; Diane Burnette, Manager of the Johnny Appleseed Visitors Center; and Kristin A. Mattson, Chief Clinical & Development Officer at Care Central.

NORTH CENTRAL YOUNG PROFESSIONALS CELEBRATE

The Young Professionals of North Central Massachusetts gathered for the 4th Annual Holiday Party and Ugly Sweater Contest held at 873 Cafe and Tavern in Ashby.



LATINX PROCUREMENT WORKSHOP

The Chamber partnered with the SBA and MA Small Business Development Center at UMASS Amherst to present Federal Contract opportunities to Latino entrepreneurs in our region. A tremendous thank you to our Presenters from the SBA which were given by Nadine Boone, Lead Business Opportunity Specialist; Carlos Hernandez, Lender Relations Specialist; Lisa Gonzalez Welch, Economic Development Specialist and from MA Small Business Development Center at UMASS Amherst Sandra Ledbetter, Government Sales Consultant.

ADAMS FARM RECIEVES LOAN

The North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC), the economic development arm of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, recently approved a loan of \$150,000 to Adams Farm and Slaughterhouse to assist toward the purchase of equipment and working capital. Pictured left to right in the photo are Norm Vigeant, Vice President of Lending at the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation; Melissa Sprague, Owner; Melissa's son, Westin; Chelsea White, Owner; Richard Adams, Owner; Beverly Mundell, Owner; Noreen Heath-Paniagua, Owner; and Sandie Cataldo, Senior Economic Development Manager at the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation.



QUICK HITS CONTINUED...



LETZ RAGE RIBBON CUTTING

The Chamber held a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for Letz Rage to celebrate their grand opening located at 49 John Fitch Highway in Fitchburg. Letz Rage offers a Rage Room (wreck room, smash room) and Paint Splatter Room experience where guests can throw paint everywhere (Walls, Ceilings, Floors, EVERY-WHERE!). Letz Rage will provide you with everything you need to rage safely!



JANUARY GOOD MORNING BREAKFAST

The Chamber held the January edition of the Good Morning North Central Breakfast at Great Wolf Lodge in Fitchburg. Our featured guest speakers were Diana DiZoglio, State Auditor Elect of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Christine Abrams, President & CEO of Commonwealth Corporation. Special thanks to Resource Management Inc. for their sponsorship of the January program.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE GIVES BACK

The Community Leadership Institute (CLI) class of 2023, chose My Turn, Inc. of Fitchburg as a community service project for the holiday season. Since 1984 My Turn, Inc. has focused on “the forgotten half”, the economically, socially and educationally disadvantaged youth in poorer neighborhoods and communities. There are currently, 35 individuals actively participating in this program.



SALT AND LIGHT IN GROTON RECEIVES LOAN

The Chamber's economic development arm provided a \$206,000 loan to Salt and Light Café in Groton to help purchase the property at 159 Main Street in Groton, where the business operates. This loan was in partnership with Main Street Bank. Pictured left to right are Steve Sugar, Vice President of Lending at the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation with Linda Coleman and Josiah Coleman, co-owners of Salt & Light Café.

QUICK HITS CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

QUICK HITS CONTINUED...



MK DANCE CENTER SUPPORT

The Chamber's economic development arm provided a \$100,000 loan to MK Dance Center, Inc. in Leominster to help with build out and renovation costs at the dance studio's new location at the Gateway Center. Pictured left to right in the photo are Norm Vigeant, Vice President of Lending at the NCMDC; Kelly Pelkey, Co-Owner of MK Dance; Moriah Kelly-Hildreth, Co-Owner of MK Dance; and Sandie Cataldo, Economic Development Manager at the Chamber.



RIBBON CUTTING FOR GREEN MEADOWS

The Chamber held a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for Green Meadows to celebrate their grand opening located at 50 Whalon Street in Fitchburg. Green Meadows is a family-owned company whose founders hail from generations of military renown. The Patton family has now applied a legacy of integrity, quality and responsibility to producing and selling premium cannabis.



PODCAST SERIES

Listen to the Inside North Central Massachusetts Podcast. This podcast series features conversations from the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce with its members. Each podcast highlights a different business or organization in our region. Tune in each Thursday for a new episode!

110 GRILL BUSINESS AFTER HOURS

The Business After Hours at 110 Grill in Leominster was a great success! We had a great night full of networking, appetizers and drinks. Thank you, 110 Grill for hosting the event!



ACESSING TRAINING GRANTS

The Chamber hosted a session on available training funds with the MassHire North Central Workforce Board. This session provided details on the training funds available in our region to aid your workforce needs.



WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP CONNECTION

The Chamber held its quarterly Women's Leadership Connection luncheon at Great Wolf Lodge in Fitchburg featuring guest speaker Elizabeth Coveney, Chief Executive Officer of Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg and Leominster. Special thanks to Fidelity Bank for sponsoring the program.

QUICK HITS CONTINUED...



CHAMBER SHOWCASES LOCAL EFFORTS AT NATIONAL FORUM

Travis Condon, our Public Affairs Manager, presented at the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) annual Workforce Development Institute in California. The conference attracted over 600 attendees, primarily community college and workforce leaders from throughout the country. The Chamber was invited to participate in a panel discussion on diversifying local talent pipelines. Travis represented the Chamber and focused on our Equitable Credentialing partnership with Mount Wachusett Community College and The Spanish American Center, Inc. He also highlighted our recent workforce study and One North Central plan. The panel received many positive comments from attendees and positive feedback from AACC leaders and from representatives of the Lumina Foundation, which funded the equitable credentialing pilot effort nationally.

FITCHBURG STATE HOSTS TOUR & SPEAKERS

The Chamber participated in a special program hosted by Fitchburg State University for federal, state and local officials. The program included presentations and a tour of the new theater block redevelopment project in Downtown Fitchburg. As part of the program, Chamber President Roy Nascimento highlighted the One North Central Regional Economic Development Plan and how the project aligns with the plan's goals.



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Rob, WCU Member and Owner of Rob's Dyno Service

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Save the Date

Annual Scholars Breakfast

The Chamber's Annual Scholars Breakfast is scheduled for Friday, May 12, 2023 from 6:45 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. at Great Wolf Lodge in Fitchburg.

The breakfast is a great opportunity for business and community leaders to come together to support educational opportunities for students in North Central Massachusetts. Over \$52,000 in scholarships will be awarded from the Chamber Foundation to graduating seniors in the



Award winning speaker, author and empowerment coach Maria Milagros is back by popular demand to serve as Master of Ceremonies for the Annual Scholars Breakfast.

region. This popular and inspiring breakfast program is a celebration of student


achievements and includes a strong turnout among students, parents, business and community leaders. Award winning speaker, author and empowerment life coach Maria Milagros will return this year as our master of ceremonies.

Proceeds from the breakfast program will benefit the Chamber Foundation, a 501 (c) 3 non-profit affiliate of the Chamber, and help support Chamber scholarships in future years. The Scholars Breakfast has replaced the golf tournament as the primary fundraising event to support the Foundation

and the annual scholarship program.


Register today as this event is sure to sell out again this year. The cost is just \$30 for Chamber members/\$42 non-members and includes a breakfast buffet. Pre-registration is required. We have introduced several new sponsorship levels and advertising opportunities for the breakfast.

To register or for more information on sponsorship and advertising opportunities, please contact Kat Deal at 978.353.7600 ext. 235 or visit www.northcentralmass.com. ♦



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North Central Calendar **EVENTS**

***Build Connections
and Relationships
at the Chamber!***

*A complete list of events with details can be found
on our event calendar on northcentralmass.com.*

*Please contact Kat Deal with any questions at
978.353.7600 ext. 235 or via email at
kdeal@northcentralmass.com.*

March 7

**Understanding Massachusetts
Unemployment Insurance
for Employers**

8:30 AM - 9:30 AM

March 10

**Good Morning North Central
Sponsored by Aging Services of
North Central Massachusetts**

6:45 AM - 8:30 AM

March 14

**Crisis Management: How to
Prevent, How to Respond
Sponsored by Fidelity Bank**

8:00 AM – 9:30 AM

March 23

**Business After Hours:
Wachusett Brewing Company**

5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

March 29

**Women's Leadership Connection
featuring U.S. Attorney for
the District of Massachusetts
Rachael Rollins Sponsored by
Fidelity Bank**

11:45 AM - 1:30 PM

March 31

**Connect North Central
Sponsored by Aroma Joe's**

8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

April 13

**Economic Forecast Breakfast
Sponsored by Fidelity Bank**

7:30 AM - 9:30 AM

April 20

**Business After Hours
at the new FATV Studio!**

5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

April 28

**Connect North Central
Sponsored by Aroma Joe's**

8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

May 12

Annual Scholars Breakfast

6:45 AM - 8:45 PM

May 16

**Business After Hours:
Wachusett Mountain Ski Area**

5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

May 23

Annual Real Estate Summit

7:30 AM – 9:30 AM

May 26

**Connect North Central
Sponsored by Aroma Joe's**

8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

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