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*north central massachusetts report*

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# North Central MASSACHUSETTS

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Chamber Report (USPS 773-650) is published quarterly by the North Central Mass. Chamber of Commerce, 860 South Street, Fitchburg, MA, for \$15 per year which is withheld from annual membership dues. Periodicals postage paid at Fitchburg, MA.



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## About the Cover:

It was an exciting Summer for the Chamber! We were recognized in June with 5-Star Accreditation and then in August we were named 2023 Chamber of the Year. Both are prestigious national honors. We don't do the work we do for the awards. We do the work to advance our communities and to better the lives of everyone who calls North Central Massachusetts home. But, still it is nice to be nationally recognized. We are proud of these honors because they highlight our commitment to quality and are a testament to our members and communities. The thoughtful process for both also helped us improve our operations and made us a better organization. Our work is a collaborative effort not possible by any single entity, so we are very thankful to you for your support. We hope that you enjoy reading this issue of the Chamber Report!

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# CHAMBER INSTALLS WELCOME SIGN IN GARDNER

*Part of regional effort to boost civic pride and create positive first impression*

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber sponsored the construction of a new welcome sign for the City of Gardner on Route 140 between the Route 2 Exit 90B off ramp and Mount Wachusett Community College.

The new sign is part of an ongoing project to construct welcoming signs at key gateways in communities throughout the region to boost civic pride and serve as a positive first impression for visitors.

The Gardner welcome sign includes a carving of the City of Gardner seal and is painted in the proud city color of blue and gold. In addition to Gardner, similar welcome signs have been installed at key gateways in Fitchburg, Leominster, Sterling and Westminster, with additional signs planned for Hubbardston, Lunenburg and Pepperell. The signs represent the region's traditional New England style. 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 funding becomes available.

"One of the goals of our regional economic redevelopment 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 Gardner will learn about the city while receiving a warm welcome as they arrive."

"Whether we are welcoming residents home or visitors to the Furniture Capital of New England, we are proud of our rich history here in Gardner and grateful to the Chamber for offering to install the sign as a way to share our legacy with those who travel on one of our gateway roads," said Mayor Michael Nicholson, City of Gardner. ♦



Pictured (L-R) in the photo are Travis Condon, Public Affairs Manager at the Chamber; Dana M. Heath, Ward 2 Councillor for the City of Gardner; Mayor Michael J. Nicholson of the City of Gardner; Representative Jonathan D. Zlotnik of Gardner; and Roy Nascimento, President & CEO of the Chamber.

# GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS UPDATE



Travis Condon, public affairs manager, and Becky Beaton, vp of lending, pose with Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll (center) at Gardner City Hall. The Healey Driscoll Administration selected Gardner as the site for their announcement of \$64.9 million in funds to communities across the State in the form of Community Development Block Grants. A number of state and local officials from member communities were also present for the announcement.

## FEDERAL AFFAIRS:

We are currently monitoring the bipartisan Building Chips in America Act of 2023 which aims to enhance the CHIPS Act passed in 2022 and increase efforts to bring microchip manufacturing back to the U.S. The Chamber is also working to engage our Washington D.C. representation on a pair of bills, H.R. 2673 American Innovation and R&D Competitiveness Act of 2023 and its Senate counterpart, S.866 American Innovation and Jobs Act. This pair of bills aims to course correct a provision in the 2017 Tax Cuts and jobs Act that set a sunset date of 2022 for a provision in the Tax Code that allowed firms to recognize all Research

and Development (R&D) expenditures in the year that they were incurred. Members of our Washington D.C. fly-in had the opportunity to discuss the impact of this legislation on their business and this continues to be a concern.

We are proud to announce that our Annual Congressional Luncheon is scheduled for November 1, 2023. Congressman Jim McGovern and Congresswoman Lori Trahan are confirmed again to participate in this popular forum for members to connect with our Congressional delegation and get insight into priorities on Capitol Hill. We would like to thank Fitchburg State University for their continued

sponsorship of the luncheon program.

## STATE AFFAIRS:

The Executive Office of Economic Development continued their series of listening sessions across the state over the Summer as part of their economic development planning process. As reported in our last issue, members of the Chamber team and our various partners in the region attended a listening session held at WPI. Since then, we also had the opportunity to provide input at sessions held at Framingham State University, the Fitchburg Legislative Building and online. We provided input across a number of areas that align with our public

policy agenda including small business supports, economic development, workforce development, and transportation.

Governor Healey signed the FY2024 State Budget on August 9. The \$56 billion budget sees an increase of approximately 6.2% compared to the fiscal year 2023 budget. The Chamber was pleased to see continued funding in the budget for several regional economic development priorities. On the tourism front, the budget included an additional \$1 million for the Tourism Trust Fund and an additional \$3 million for the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT) for tourism and

*Continued on page 7*



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hospitality recovery. The additional investments in tourism were supported by the Chamber as we believe they are crucial for the continued promotion of the state and the North Central Massachusetts region. We were also pleased to see that funding for early college saw a \$9 million increase over last year's budget and funding for innovation pathways saw a \$1 million increase. A new line item also allocates \$5 million for equitable scaling of

pathway programs. The Student Opportunity Act is once again fully funded and the State will launch its MassReconnect to support getting residents 25 or older into community college programs.

The Chamber participated in a virtual discussion with MassDOT officials and stakeholders from across the Commonwealth as they discussed their plans for potential rail expansion along the Northern Tier corridor. Not only would this investment bring more visitor dollars to the area, but

it has potential to greatly help with workforce challenges involving transportation.

### ELECTIONS:

In local affairs, two of the region's three mayors face contested elections later this fall. A number of City Council seats across the three cities will also see contested races. On the State level, the seat left vacant by former Senator Anne Gobi when she joined Economic Secretary Yvonne Hao's team is up for grabs with multiple candidates vying for the seat including two current state

representatives. Once again, we will be gathering our current elected officials and candidates together for our Legislative and Candidates Reception. This is one of our most exciting events of the year and provides members of the community with the opportunity to engage our elected officials and those looking to hold office. This year's event is sponsored by Mount Wachusett Community College and will be held at the Chocksett Inn in Sterling on Thursday, September 21 from 5:00 to 7:00 PM. ♦

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The North Central Massachusetts Chamber Board of Directors Celebrate Following the Announcement of the Chamber Receiving 5-Star Accreditation.

## CHAMBER RECEIVES 5-STAR ACCREDITATION

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce has been awarded a 5-star Accreditation as a result of its sound policies, effective organizational procedures, and positive impact on the community by the Accrediting Board of the United States Chamber of Commerce. The announcement was made to an audience of nearly 300 business and community leaders at the Chamber's Annual Business Meeting on June 15, 2023.

Accreditation is the only national program to recognize chambers of commerce for their effective organizational procedures and community involvement. In order to achieve this recognition, a chamber must meet minimum standards in their operations and programs, including areas of governance, government affairs, communications and technology. This

comprehensive self-review was conducted over a four-month period and required preparation of an extensive application, including compilation and review of volumes of materials required by the Accrediting Board, and demonstration of competency in nine core areas ranging from finance to facilities.

Of the approximately 7,000 chambers in the U.S., there are currently only 140 5-Star rated chambers, which represent the top three percent of all chambers in the country. In Massachusetts, the North Central Massachusetts Chamber is one of only two chambers with this prestigious accreditation.

"When chambers of commerce earn the distinction of becoming accredited, it is a mark of excellence for the organization, its staff, and its leadership" said Raymond P. Towle, U.S. Chamber vice president, Federation Relations and Institute for Organization Management. "This rigorous

review includes all aspects of a chamber's policies, operations, and programming. Accredited chambers are recognized for their continued advocacy of free enterprise, and for their commitment to serving members and their local business communities. Congratulations on this tremendous accomplishment."

"We are incredibly honored to receive this national designation which places us among the best chambers of commerce in the country," said Roy M. Nascimento, president & CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. "We challenged ourselves to improve our Chamber for the betterment of our members and our region. Receiving this accreditation only motivates us to continue to remain engaged, active and innovative on behalf of our members and communities in North Central Massachusetts."

Local chambers are rated Accredited, 3-Stars, 4-Stars,

or 5-Stars. State chambers are recognized as either Accredited State Chamber or Accredited State Chamber with Distinction. The final determination is made by the Accrediting Board.

The accreditation report noted the North Central Massachusetts Chamber has demonstrated an excellent track record of operating a successful chamber and achieving desirable results for its members. Several of the Chamber's programs, events and initiatives were highlighted for special recognition, including its leadership role in helping members and the community navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Chamber's leadership in talent and workforce development. The Chamber also received special recognition for its thoughtful and impactful efforts around government affairs and volunteer recognition, and for investments it has made in technology. ♦



# FEATURED MEMBER PROFILE

## LOCAL SUPPORTING LOCAL: ECI STORES TO CELEBRATE 25 YEARS IN BUSINESS

When it comes to supporting the local community, you can look no further than Cassandra and Neil Abramson, owners of ECI Stores, who will be celebrating 25 years in business in October later this year.

ECI Stores is the parent company of four local consignment shops in Leominster, Ma: Cutie Patuties, CP & Company, Cutiques, and Q for Teens. Established in October 1998, ECI Stores has grown into four locations that are conveniently right near each other.

"You can do all of your shopping in one day!" Abramson said.

Cutie Patuties specializes in gently used items, sized for newborns to preteens, which can be anything from clothing, toys, and baby equipment like strollers. Q for Teens is everything you can imagine that's fashionable for a teenager and young adult, including clothing, bags, shoes, accessories, and more. According to the website, "Q is You! Q can be whatever style your young adult is all about: retro, vintage, hip, modern, romantic, or rustic - we've got it all!"

CP & Company provides a large selection of misses, petites, and plus size clothing for women and adults, which also includes bags, accessories, clothing, and more. Cutiques just recently celebrated their 10-year anniversary with their ribbon cutting this past March 2023. This division of consignment focuses on home décor and furniture, with

everything from a kitchen table to lamps and lighting, wall hangings and more.

"One of the things that we really try to do is community involvement," Abramson said. "More than most businesses, your local consignment store is your community, because

next. She decided right then and there that she was going to open her own store instead.

"I went to the car to call my husband and said, 'I'm opening a consignment store!'"

As their child grew, her needs grew and expanded

"We do everything we can to support the North Central area and support local businesses."



that's how we source our inventory – there's no truck pulling up that has inventory in it. It all comes in from your neighbors: things that they've outgrown, things that they don't need, and things that they are ready to move on from. It's all community driven."

When their daughter was approximately six months old, Abramson would visit her favorite consignment shop in Worcester and do all her shopping there for her newborn, until one day, that shop decided to go out of business. Disheartened, Abramson thought about where she was going to shop

into the next size range, ECI Stores also expanded into the next steps: teen clothing, shoes, accessories, and more to what you see today.

With a focus on local, consignment stores live and breathe from the local community. Everything that you see in consignment stores is brought in by neighbors, family, and friends who have outgrown the item. These items could be useful for someone else and their family.

"We price it, make descriptions, put it on our website, and we can even ship directly to you if needed," Abramson said. "There's hardly any other business,

especially a small business, that has about 3,500 unique, individual items on the website."

And although it may be a lot of work, the Abramsons make it look easy, especially since after the COVID-19 pandemic nearly three years ago.

"We've been doing more online since the pandemic. It really provided us the time and necessity to be able to focus back on the business," she said. "Businesses had the opportunity to either shut down and wait, or use the time productively and say, 'what can we do for after?' And that's what we did, every single day."

Abramson now provides online sales through their website, as well as Facebook and social media sales. "We reach our customers however they need it."

Being able to think on their feet and find a solution for not just themselves, but for their customers as well is what makes ECI Stores unique, and providing sales online shows diversity in what they can offer as a consignment store.

"We try to keep everything locally driven – insurance, banking, office supplies, coffee...you name it. We do everything we can to support the North Central area and support local businesses," she said.

As a long time member of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber, ECI Stores loves the ongoing educational opportunities. The North Central

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# CHAMBER UPDATES

## SMALL BUSINESS ENERGY RELIEF GRANT PROGRAM:

The Chamber is offering one-time energy grants of \$1,000 to small businesses to help to off-set high energy prices and financial obstacles. Thank you to National Grid for contributing \$100,000 to the Chamber to help make this grant program possible. Since launching the grant in July, we have already awarded \$49,000 in grants to 49 small businesses. There are still grants available, so we encourage members to reach out to us to see if they are eligible. We are prioritizing chamber members for the grants.



Chamber member Bodanza & Bodanza Law Offices was awarded a \$1,000 small business energy grant from the Chamber. Thank you to National Grid for partnering with us on this grant program!

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT:

In August, Travis Condon, the Chamber's public affairs manager, and Kat Deal, the Chamber's programs & events manager, completed their second year of the US Chamber's Northeast Institute for Organization Management (IOM). IOM is a four-year national professional development program geared towards chamber of commerce and



Travis Condon and Kat Deal attended the Institute for Organization Management in August.

association professionals. Participants complete a week-long intensive session each year taught by university professors, industry experts, and leading practitioners in the chamber industry. Courses included advocacy, media training, membership, finance, legal issues, human resources to name just a few. They also had an opportunity to reconnect with other Chamber and Association professionals from all over the country.



Chamber president Roy Nascimento presents at the ACCE National Convention in August.

## ACCE CONVENTION:

Chamber President & CEO Roy Nascimento was invited to present at the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives National Convention in Salt Lake City in August. He spoke at two sessions titled "Data-Driven Workforce & Economic Growth Strategies" and "Overcoming Barriers to Upskilling Workers" where

he shared our experiences and efforts with chamber and economic development leaders from throughout the country.

## NASCIMENTO ELECTED TO ACCE FOUNDATION:

Chamber president & CEO Roy Nascimento was elected recently to serve on the board of directors for the ACCE Foundation, a 501(c)3 that supports the work of the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives. ACCE's Foundation was established to fund programming, peer-to-peer learning, and leadership development for chamber professionals seeking to create positive change by addressing the issues that challenge the long-term economic health and quality of life in our country's cities and towns. Directors bring their knowledge and expertise to help the ACCE Foundation understand industry trends and the needs of members working in the priority areas of the Foundation. Those include education and talent; diversity, equity and inclusion; and economic and community development.

**WEBSITE:** The Chamber has started a project to redesign the Chamber website to make it a more dynamic and valuable resource for our members and communities. As part of the process, we plan to consolidate our Chamber website – northcentralmass.com - and our economic development website – choosenorthcentral.com – to make it easier to manage and avoid duplication. We also recently completed a homepage

redesign of our tourism website – visitnorthcentral.com. We are excited about the project and look forward to launching the redesigned site in the coming months!

## ONLINE TRAINING:

In conjunction with the Chamber website redesign project, we are also launching a new online training platform called Initiate. Initiate is a comprehensive online training resource that will be integrated with our redesigned website and offers several modules around starting a business, marketing, operations, bookkeeping and more that many small businesses need.

**NEW LOANS:** The North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC), the Chamber's economic development arm, has approved and closed on a total of twenty-three small business loans totaling \$1,145,000 to date for FY23. The smallest loan was just \$5,000 while the largest was \$216,000. Our loans helped to leverage an additional \$1,066,579 in capital from banks, public entities and from the borrowers. The majority of the loans helped fund start-up businesses as well as some existing small businesses that were expanding. Two of the loans were made under our new Regional Business Investment Fund and are helping with real estate development projects in two of our communities that have been prioritized for economic development. These loans resulted in the creation of 63 new jobs and the retention of 35 jobs.





NCMDC provided a \$13,000 loan to new business Beauty Empire in Leominster to provide start-up funds.

**MINI-GRANTS:** The NCMDC continues to offer mini-grants between \$500 - \$5,000 to our borrowers to assist with technical assistance. For FY2023, we have approved a total of ten mini-grants totaling \$35,288.93 for bookkeeping, marketing, signage and other professional assistance. Prioritization is given to existing loan clients but we will consider other small businesses in North Central Massachusetts with a demonstrated need.

**TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:** Our economic development team has provided a total of 2052 hours of direct technical assistance to existing and start-up businesses in the region. During the last quarter, our team also worked with the Massachusetts Export Center to help several businesses with questions around certificates of origin. In addition, the Small Business Development Center at Clark University has resumed holding office hours at the Chamber to help support start-ups and expanding small businesses in the region.

**NORTH CENTRAL COMPACT:** In June, the members of the Compact met again to continue to explore

collaborative strategies to the workforce challenges in the region. The North Central Talent Compact is a collective impact coalition convened by the Chamber and other major stakeholders to address the complex talent and workforce challenges facing the region. The group consists of a group of prominent business, education, workforce and community leaders who are committed to collective action and leadership. An outgrowth of the Compact meeting is an expanded Career and Hiring Event in October, with more schools participating and bringing students to connect with employers to learn about available careers.

**LATINX OUTREACH:** The Chamber and NCMDC continue to prioritize efforts to engage more with Latinx business owners/entrepreneurs and connect them with financial resources, programs and business networks. Latinos are the largest minority group in the region and increasingly playing a larger role in our economy. We are currently in the process of interviewing candidates for the bi-lingual Community Business Advisor role to help with these efforts.

**PODCAST:** We continue to trend upwards with our Inside North Central podcast series. Over the last year we have had 2,549 plays on the major podcast services, which reflects a 300% increase over the previous year. Our podcasts are currently available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, and Google. Thank you to all the members who have participated in interviews

and/or listened to the new Podcast series.

**SOLAR:** From its inception in August 2014 through July 2023 the solar field on Pleasant St. has produced 12,843,986 kWh of Net Metering Credits to the manufacturers participating in the program. Total value of these credits is \$3,015,926 and the collective savings to participants totals \$2,563,537. As one of the participants, the Chamber has received \$241,274 in energy savings to-date.

#### CHAMBER GIFT CARDS:

In preparation for the upcoming holiday season, we encourage member merchants interested in accepting the new revamped Gift Local E-Gift Cards to contact the Chamber. We are approaching the one-year anniversary since the transition to the new platform for processing the gift cards. Feedback from participating members and gift card recipients has been positive so far. There is no charge to participate and the new cards are easy to process via the Mastercard network, however participating merchants must run an activation card from the Chamber in order to be able to accept the cards. ♦

*Continued from page 9*

Massachusetts Chamber keeps their members updated on everything that you need when it comes to business. They also make sure that you have everything that you need to ensure that your business succeeds. Additionally, ECI Stores has an appreciation for the business connections with other local businesses and Chamber members.

“Everything that you

do makes an impact, and the local store needs your help and support as well because they’re employing your neighbors and the people around you. You get a better product and a better relationship with local. If you can keep it local, it makes a difference.”

You can find out more about ECI Stores and their four locations on their website at [www.ecistores.com](http://www.ecistores.com) or giving them a call at 978.534.6604. ♦

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## MY TURN, Inc.

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80 Erdman Way, Suite 212  
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EDUCATION

## Nashoba Paddler, LLC

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398 West Main Street  
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SPORTS AND RECREATION

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## New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill

Gitu Jain  
11 French Drive  
Boylston, MA 01505  
ARTS, CULTURE AND  
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## New Horizons Medical

George Borisovskiy  
285 Main Street  
Fitchburg, MA 01420  
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## Novalarm Systems Inc

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Kristen Smith  
44 Old Princeton Rd., Suite 101  
Fitchburg, MA 01420  
ADVERTISING AND MEDIA

## Optoglo Solar Signs

Gina Hinckley  
493 Lancaster Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
ADVERTISING AND MEDIA

## Pepperell Dental Associates

Michelle Goldsmith  
75 Main Street  
Pepperell, MA 01463  
HEALTH CARE AND MEDICAL

## Remax Diverse

Hejoma Garcia  
55 Meade Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
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## Sentinel & Enterprise

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PO Box 4004  
Westford, MA 01886  
ADVERTISING AND MEDIA

## Singapore Restaurant/L&L Restaurant Two

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BEVERAGES

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313 Longley Rd  
Groton, MA 01450  
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Leominster, MA 01453  
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# North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce Honored as 2023 Chamber of the Year

*First chamber of commerce in Massachusetts and  
New England to be recognized with this prestigious national honor*



ASSOCIATION OF CHAMBER OF COMMERCE EXECUTIVES  
**CHAMBER OF THE YEAR**  
**2023 WINNER**



Chamber president Roy Nascimento and Teresa Roberts, director of finance and operations accept the 2023 Chamber of the Year Award on behalf of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber during the awards ceremony.

**T**he Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) has recognized the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce as 2023 Chamber of the Year. The award was announced during the ACCE's annual convention held on August 1, in Salt Lake City, Utah, and positions the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce as the first chamber of commerce in Massachusetts and New England to receive the prestigious award.

"The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce is honored and humbled to be named the 2023 Chamber of the Year," said Roy Nascimento, president & CEO of the chamber. "We are very

proud to bring this award home to our region and to the Commonwealth. This recognition exemplifies the spirit of collaboration and collective action that lives within North Central Massachusetts and the dedication of our hard-working staff, our engaged board of directors, our community partners and the many diverse businesses that make up our membership."

Chamber of the Year is the most prestigious and competitive award in the chamber industry and recognizes chambers that demonstrate excellence in operations, member services and community leadership. Based in Alexandria, Va., ACCE has more than 1,600 chambers of commerce and related business and economic

development organizations as members, representing more than 9,000 professionals in the industry.

"Chambers of commerce play an increasingly vital role in promoting regional prosperity," said ACCE President & CEO Sheree Anne Kelly. "Earning this pinnacle achievement reflects their commitment and drive to ensure the vibrancy of their communities and organizational success. Congratulations on the North Central Massachusetts Chamber's outstanding leadership, dedication to its community and serving as a role model for the chamber profession."

"This award is a testament to not only the quality of the Chamber's programs and initiatives, but its impact

on our region as well," said James Vander Hooven, president, Mount Wachusett Community College and chair of the Chamber's board of directors. "I've witnessed the impact the Chamber provides firsthand from my time on the board and as a leader of a member organization. From helping support entrepreneurs with loans and technical assistance to marketing the region as a destination for visitors and groups to championing important public investments, the Chamber's efforts benefit everyone who calls North Central Massachusetts home."

ACCE previously named the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce as a finalist for Chamber of the Year recognition in 2017 and 2021.





Pictured L-R are Carlos Phillips, CCE, president & CEO of the Greenville Chamber (SC) and chair of the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) Board of Directors; Teresa Roberts, director of finance and operations at the North Central Massachusetts Chamber; Roy Nascimento, president & CEO of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber; and Sheree Anne Kelly, president & CEO of ACCE.

For the 2023 award, the Chamber presented a number of innovative programs for consideration, including its efforts to engage and support Latinx small businesses, partnerships built to support talent and workforce development in the region, as well as the Chamber's efforts to update and transform the Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center from a highway rest stop into a unique and inclusive anchor destination showcasing the region and helping advance the economy. The recognition also comes just a few months after the North Central Massachusetts Chamber was awarded five-star accreditation by the Accrediting Board of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for its operations and initiatives.

“The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce is honored and humbled to be named the 2023 Chamber of the Year,”

The Chamber of the Year award's multi-stage selection process starts with an initial operations benchmark, where chambers must meet minimum thresholds in key performance areas. Qualifying chambers are then invited to submit a written application addressing all aspects of organizational operations and programmatic work. Finalists are invited to interview before a panel of experienced chamber professionals.

“Our city and region are truly grateful for the economic partnership that

brings business and tourist dollars to our area,” said Mayor Stephen DiNatale of Fitchburg. “The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce is deserving of this prestigious honor and the City of Fitchburg offers a resounding congratulations for this accomplishment.”

“The North Central Massachusetts Chamber has been a great resource to us in the Chair City,” said Mayor Michael Nicholson of Gardner. “From partnering with us on the new Business Development Fund,

marketing initiatives for the region, and more, the Chamber does tremendous work and I'm looking forward to that work continuing in the future. Congratulations from all of us in Gardner!”

“The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce is a strong partner that regularly collaborates with the city in multiple ways to advance our economy,” said Mayor Dean Mazzarella of Leominster. “I am so glad others have finally recognized what we already knew—that we have the best chamber of commerce in the country!”

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce develops and delivers a wide variety

*Continued on page 16*

*Continued from page 15*


of programs and services designed to bolster the local economy and support businesses of all shapes and sizes, from large corporations to small startups. The Chamber views itself as a connector, facilitator, advocate, thought leader and partner to businesses, organizations and communities in the region. In addition to providing services and programs for its member organizations, the Chamber also leads regional economic development and tourism efforts through its affiliate organizations the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation and Visit North Central Massachusetts along with its education and workforce efforts through the North Central Massachusetts Chamber Foundation.

“At the North Central Massachusetts Chamber, we strongly believe in continuous improvement, and the Chamber of the Year nomination process is a great opportunity for introspection and evaluation of our operations and the work we are doing. While we are thrilled to be recognized and celebrated nationally by our peers, the real value results in making us a better chamber and propels us to move forward,” said Nascimento. “This award also reflects the Chamber and business community’s commitment to improving the quality of life in North Central Massachusetts. Our work is a collaborative effort not possible by any single entity, and we are very thankful for our many partnerships with businesses, government, non-profits, educational institutions and many more.”



The origins of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce can be traced back to the early 1900s with the formation of chambers of commerce in Leominster and Fitchburg. In 1984, the boards of directors of both organizations, along with several smaller business groups, voted to regionalize and merged to form the North Central


Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. The chamber has since evolved into the region’s leading economic development and business advocacy organization. Today, the Chamber serves nearly 700 leading businesses and organizations that employ over 25,000 people in the twenty-seven communities that comprise North Central Massachusetts. ♦

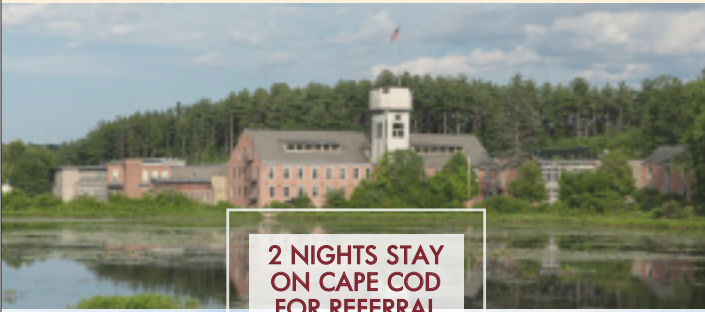


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# WorkNorthCentral Career & Hiring Event

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# EMERGING LEADERS GRADUATE FROM COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

*Nineteen  
of the region's  
up-and-  
coming leaders  
recognized  
for community  
service,  
engagement*

The Community Leadership Institute (CLI) Class of 2023 were recognized at the Chamber's Annual Meeting held on June 15 at Great Wolf Lodge in Fitchburg.

Nineteen graduates, who were identified as up-and-coming leaders in the region, completed the nine-month program which is focused on providing participants with individual leadership skills, a stronger understanding of the region, and deeper connections to business and community leaders.

"The Chamber developed CLI to inspire a new generation of community leaders to enthusiastically assume important roles in their community while motivating participants from diverse backgrounds to be influential in our region's future," said Roy

M. Nascimento, president and CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce.

Mike Greenwood, Ph.D., professor of business at Fitchburg State University and chairman of the CLI Steering Committee, was impressed by the caliber of this year's class. "Each year, I continue to be amazed with the dedication, creativity and motivation of our participants," said Dr. Greenwood. "Programs like CLI are important to our community in an effort to ensure a continuity of leadership, community engagement and service as our region's current leaders look forward to retirement."

The nine-month CLI program traditionally runs from October to June and includes an orientation and eight day-long sessions on

various topic areas, including Personal Leadership; Non-Profit Governance/Volunteerism; History of the Region; Media & Crisis Communications; Healthcare; Law & Justice; Legislation/Public Policy; Arts & Culture; and Economic Development. In addition, the CLI participants complete a community project through the course of the nine-month program. Participants select a project, or break into smaller groups of similar interest, with a goal to positively affect the community while also managing and executing the project before the end of the program year. The program culminates with a commencement ceremony at the Chamber's Annual Meeting where the class and their service projects are recognized.

"The service project aspect of the curriculum is my favorite part of the CLI program," said Kat Deal, programs & events manager, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. "I am always inspired and amazed by the incredible projects that come out of each CLI class. Past CLI projects have included the creation of a new non-profit organization to help with holiday gifts for families dealing with cancer to a project designed to help improve the appearance of a downtown business district in order to support future business development and community inclusion."

This year's class worked on three service projects, including the establishment



## CLI NON-TRADITIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS

The Chamber's Community Leadership Institute (CLI) Class of 2023 recognized the first recipients of a new non-traditional scholarship program that was launched as an outgrowth of a community project undertaken by the class. Funding was provided by local companies and individuals as a result of outreach by the class. Seven \$2,000 scholarships were provided to help bridge the financial gap to attend programs in cosmetology, electrical engineering, licensed practical nursing, human services, or toward tuition to attend a community college or four-year university.



Graduates of the Community Leadership Institute Class of 2023 are pictured as follows:

Front Row L-R: Natalia Oliver, City of Fitchburg; Matthew Kilcoyne, IC Federal Credit Union; Stephen Oldfield, Montachusett Regional Transit Authority; Becky Beaton, North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation; Nicole Kalloch, Rollstone Bank & Trust; Alex Welch, Making Opportunity Count; Jeanice Bulnes, AIS; Sarah Stebulis, Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority; and Sabine Dupoux, Mount Wachusett Community College; Back Row L-R: Shane McCormack, Aging Services of North Central Massachusetts; Christian Estrella, Fitchburg State University; Jacob Lippman, Leominster Credit Union; Terry Young, North Central Massachusetts Chamber; Jennifer Phelps, Fidelity Bank; Patrick Ellis, Enterprise Bank; Wiley Cordone, Bemis Associates; Ryan May, Avidia Bank; and William Spencer, Sponsored by Fidelity Bank. Not Pictured is Rachel Graddy, Sponsored by Fitchburg State University.

of a “Wash it Forward” program and a non-traditional scholarship program for students.

Wash it Forward provided an opportunity for the homeless individuals in the region to wash and dry their laundry for free at area laundromats with detergent and dryer sheets provided by the generosity of CLI participants. Wash and Fold in Leominster hosted an event, with pizza donated by Papou’s Pizza, while Laundry World in Fitchburg also hosted a Wash it Forward event that also provided access to a food pantry led by the owner of Laundry World.

“Wash it Forward was

a fantastic success that helped many people,” said Ryan May, head teller at Avidia Bank and 2023 CLI graduate. “I hope this inspires people to continue to do this, even if it isn’t for an event, but just to help someone who needs a hand.”

Patrick Ellis, senior branch manager, vice president, Enterprise Bank & Trust and 2023 CLI graduate said, “We were looking for a grassroots project that would have a real impact on real people. And everyone has to do laundry!”

This year’s class also developed a non-traditional scholarship program which provided seven individuals with a \$2,000 scholarship

each to help bridge the financial gap to attend programs in cosmetology, electrical engineering, licensed practical nursing, human services, or toward tuition to attend a community college or four-year university. The CLI Class partnered with My Turn to deliver the scholarships. My Turn is an organization that helps people develop their skills, goals and self-confidence through alternative education, post-secondary planning, career exploration and employment training. As an outgrowth of the CLI project, the North Central Massachusetts Chamber

Foundation hopes to continue to provide non-traditional scholarships to students who may not qualify for traditional scholarships or other funding opportunities.

The Community Leadership Institute began in 1988, known then as Leadership North Central. Over the last 25 years, more than 250 participants have graduated from the Institute and become leaders in their communities, with over 100 in the last five years. Participants for the Institute are sponsored by their business and are seen as leaders or potential leaders within that company. ◇

# TOURISMupdate

The Chamber's destination marketing arm, Visit North Central Massachusetts (VNCM), ended its fiscal year on June 30, 2023. Here is a recap of efforts.

## Branding & Advertising

Throughout the year we promoted the region with a blend of print and digital advertising strategies across our targeted markets. The creative messaging for these ads focused on "Everything You Love About New England... A Lot Closer to Home" and highlighted each of the four seasons. To achieve this, we focused on developing fresh and engaging content for our website. This included creating captivating Spring/Summer Blog Articles as well as compiling a comprehensive listing of upcoming events. To attract more visitors from the drive market, we implemented a range of strategies combining both print and digital advertising. We invested in paid social media campaigns to reach a wider audience

through MassLive; employed targeted and geofenced digital advertising to maximize our outreach through Cumulus; utilized paid Search Engine Marketing techniques to improve our online visibility through Local IQ; and updated a large-format display at Logan Airport. We also utilized print/digital campaigns through AAA and Yankee Magazine; custom content listings and emails through Visit New England; and listings in Trip Advisor. All these efforts were carefully crafted to effectively showcase the diverse attractions and offerings of our region and to increase web traffic. By utilizing a combination of print and digital platforms, we aimed to captivate potential visitors and encourage them to explore the unique experiences available in North Central Massachusetts.

## Visitor Guide

We also published the Spring/Summer edition of the Guide to North Central Massachusetts to showcase the region

as a unique destination for living, working, and visiting. We increased our printing from 35,000 copies in 2022 to 40,000 copies per edition and also increased distribution from 300 to 350 high-traffic locations throughout New England. A digital version is also shared on our website, social media, via email, and shared with the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT) to maximize its reach and engagement. Thank you to all the members who advertised in the Guide. Anyone interested in advertising in the next edition should contact Diane Burnette at [dburnette@northcentralmass.com](mailto:dburnette@northcentralmass.com).

## FAM Trips & Travel Shows

We continued to actively participate in FAM Trips & Travel Shows to promote the region. During the year, we collaborated with our partners to host several familiarization tours for group tour operators, travel writers and social media influencers. We also participated in several tourism related travel

events and responded to inquiries from event organizers interested in the region.

## Social Media & Website

We continued to be very active on social media. From January to June, Visit North Central Massachusetts' Facebook page had an impressive organic reach of 427,645, attracting 6,811 new followers. In addition to the organic reach, the page also utilized paid promotion with an additional reach of 295,246 and 1,184,710 paid impressions. On Instagram, the page achieved an organic reach of 12,278 and gained 429 new followers during the second half of the year. Google analytics indicates we also saw a 119.20% increase in visitors to our website for FY23. During the same time period we also had over 802,067 google impressions.

## Lodging & Visitor Data

Tourism indicators for the region continue to be very strong. STR data indicates that hotel occupancy YTD



through June was 71.7%, a 3.5% increase over the previous year; ADR was \$191.17 which is a 9.5% increase; RevPar was \$137.05, a 13.3% increase over the previous year; total room revenue was up 13.3%; and rooms sold was up 3.5%. AirDNA data also showed that the supply of short-term rentals (vacation rentals) in the region increased from 144 in 2022 to 229 in 2023 through June. Occupancy through June of short-term rentals was 58%, a decrease of 6.7% over the prior year, and average daily rate (ADR) was \$235, an 18.4% increase over the prior year. RevPar was \$136, a 10.5% increase over the prior year. Economic impact data recently released for CY2022 by the state indicates that direct visitor spending jumped 39% to \$184.9 million in the region, which brings the region back up to pre-pandemic visitor spending levels. Local tax receipts also increased by 85% to \$6.1 million for CY2022.

### What's Next?

Our team is currently working to finalize the Fall edition of the Guide to North Central Massachusetts and to develop our new marketing plan to present to the Board of Directors and MOTT for approval. We will also be launching a redesigned home page for visitnorthcentral.com soon and are introducing a new series of cultural performances/demonstrations in the Fall at the Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center to highlight local culture and attractions in the region. In partnership with two other Regional Tourism Councils, we are working to implement the off season marketing campaign funded from the recent federal economic development grant. We are also making plans to once again participate in the Big E and are actively working to host additional familiarization trips with travel influencers. ♦



In partnership with local Apple Orchards in North Central Massachusetts, we offer complimentary apples to the traveling public at the Johnny Appleseed Visitors Center in Lancaster during the busy Fall season. It is a nice tradition that helps to showcase the region's agricultural heritage and connection to apples. Pictured here is the first batch of apples provided by Red Apple Farm in Phillipston.

## ADVERTISING OPPORTUNITIES

Don't miss the opportunity to place your ad in the Spring/Summer edition of the Visitor Guide to North Central Massachusetts!



For more information on advertising  
Please contact Diane Burnette  
dburnette@NorthCentralMass.com

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## FABRICS N THINGS RIBBON CUTTING

Congratulations to Chamber member Fabrics n Things located at 843 Central Street in Leominster on their recent opening. They are passionate about bringing the most amazing selection of new and discontinued fabrics, notions, sewing supplies, and crafts. They are the home of \$3.95 per yard fabric.



## INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL COLBRO FIRST AID AND SAFETY TRAINING

In July, Travis Condon and Kat Deal interviewed Rob Collette, Owner, EMT, and Instructor at ColBro First Aid & Safety Training, LLC from the back of his ambulance. Tune in to the podcast series as we highlight a different member business or organization each week.



## THE PAUPER'S PANTY RIBBON CUTTING

Congratulations to Chamber member, The Pauper's Panty located at 695 Main Street in Fitchburg on their ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the opening of The Finicky Fork Catering Company's new restaurant.

## WORCESTER BRAVEHEARTS EVENT

The Chamber teamed up with the Chamber member the Worcester Bravehearts over the Summer to offer members the chance to network, taste craft beer, hear live music, and attend a baseball game. Thank you to the Worcester Bravehearts for a fun evening!





## Out & About CONTINUED...



### INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL

Travis Condon, public affairs manager at the Chamber joined Larry Casassa of the Rail Trail Steering Committee for a special edition of the Inside North Central Massachusetts Podcast over the Summer where they discussed the new Twin Cities Rail Trail, that connects Fitchburg and Leominster, and the positive impact the trail is having on the region.



### RADIO INTERVIEW WPKZ

Thank you to WPKZ Radio for hosting the Chamber bi-monthly on their morning show. Pictured here are Travis Condon, public affairs manager, and Kat Deal, events & programs manager, from the Chamber with Sherman and Noah of the WPKZ morning show after one of the Summer segments.



### CHAMBER BUSINESS MEETING

The Chamber celebrated its 39th Annual Business Meeting in June. A big thank you to our sponsors and members for their support! The event included the Chamber's annual recognition awards, commencement for the Class of 2023 Community Leadership Institute and keynote presentation from Steve Gross, founder and chief playmaker of the Life is Good Kids Foundation



OUT & ABOUT  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 24



## Out & About CONTINUED...



### CONVENIENTMD RIBBON CUTTING

Congratulations to Chamber member ConvenientMD Urgent Care located at 20 Commercial Road, Suite 2 in Leominster, on their recent opening.



### AMBASSADOR OF THE YEAR

Congratulations to Chamber Ambassador Beth Hodge, associate director of resource development at the United Way of North Central Massachusetts, for being named 2023 Ambassador of Year. Chamber Ambassadors are valued volunteers to the Chamber who serve as the face of the organization in the community. They assist the Chamber with communications to new and existing members, participate in ribbon cuttings and help connect members at various Chamber events. Hodge was voted Ambassador of the Year by her fellow Chamber Ambassadors.



### INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL GROTON MUSIC CENTER

The Groton Hill Music's Catherine Coleman, director of development, and David Leary, director of marketing were interviewed for the Inside North Central Massachusetts Podcast series over the Summer. Check out the episode to hear about the rich history of the organization and their commitment to serving the region through high caliber music education and live performances.



### INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL BULL RUN

Owner Alison Tocci of The Bull Run Restaurant located in Shirley was interviewed during a recent segment of the Chamber' Inside North Central Massachusetts podcast series. Check out the episode to hear how her local roots called her back to run the restaurant her family has owned for more than 70 years.



### MARIBEL CRUZ HONORED

Our congratulations go out to Maribel Cruz, housing and community development director for the City of Fitchburg, for being recognized as a Commonwealth Heroine at a special ceremony at the State House. Maribel, who until recently served as the Chamber's economic development manager, was nominated by Senator John Cronin for this special honor in recognition of her leadership in the community. Family, friends and several of the Chamber staff had the privilege of attending the ceremony in June. Our congratulations go out to Maribel and all the recipients from North Central Massachusetts!

## Out & About CONTINUED...



### TACO JOHNS RIBBON CUTTING

The Chamber was pleased to join local officials to help celebrate the grand opening of Taco John's in Leominster. Congratulations on the opening of the new restaurant!



### VETERANS CENTER RIBBON CUTTING

The Chamber was thrilled to join community leaders in Fitchburg to celebrate the grand opening of the Veterans Center at the historic Fitchburg Armory! Operating during the same hours as the senior center, this remarkable space offers meeting rooms, a recreation area, a library, donated clothing, a food pantry and more. It's a place where veterans discover support, camaraderie and offered abundant valuable resources.



### INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL BOLTON ORCHARDS

Owner Sarah O'Toole of Bolton Orchards located at 125 Still River Road in Bolton was interviewed during the summer for the Inside North Central Massachusetts Podcast series. Download the podcast to hear how this fifth-generation family-run farm and store continues to create a welcoming and delicious environment for regulars and tourists alike with fresh local products.

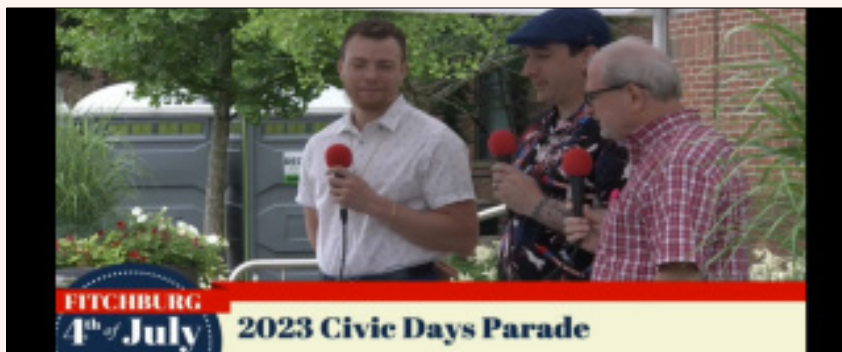


### INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL DR. GREENWOOD

Professor Michael Greenwood, PhD and chair of the Business Department at Fitchburg State University was a guest on Inside North Central Massachusetts in August. Hear how Dr. Greenwood's passion for business and leadership helped bring the Community Leadership Institute program back to the Chamber.

### CIVIC DAYS PARADE

The Chamber's Travis Condon, public affairs manager, joined Glenn Fossa and Alex Vera in serving as an emcee for the Fitchburg Civic Days Fourth of July Parade which aired live on Fitchburg Access Television.



OUT & ABOUT CONTINUED ON PAGE 26



## Out & About CONTINUED...



### YP PROFESSIONALS GOLF EVENT

The Chamber's Young Professionals of North Central Massachusetts kicked off their program season at Oak Hill Country Club.

The event, Fore Then Pour, included a one hour lesson with a pro, 9 holes of golf, and a networking reception in the 1921.

Thank you to Oak Hill for your help with our program!



### CPR CLASS

Over the Summer, the Chamber staff participated in life saving CPR/AED training at our offices. Thank you to Chamber member Heywood Hospital for providing the training.



### WACHUSETT SBA AWARD

The Chamber was pleased to join the U.S. Small Business Administration for a special event in August where they honored Wachusett Ski Area as the Legacy Business for Massachusetts. Attendees included SBA District Director Bob Nelson, Congressman Jim McGovern and State Representative Kim Ferguson. The Crowley family were there to accept the award. Congratulations to the Crowley family and everyone at Wachusett Ski Area for the well-deserved recognition!



### DAVID GINISI - ANNUAL MEETING

David Ginisi of the Boys and Girls Club of Fitchburg/Leominster was recognized at the Chamber's Annual Meeting as the outgoing Chair of the Young Professionals of North Central Massachusetts.



### INSIDE NORTH CENTRAL UKULELE J

Jodie Rachman, Owner and Founder of Ukulele J was a guest in June for the Chamber's Inside North Central Massachusetts Podcast series. Check out the podcast to learn more about how this camp kid's love of music has turned into a business that brings joy to all ages.



### HEATHER HILL - ANNUAL MEETING

Heather Hill of H2O Damage was recognized at the Chamber's Annual Meeting as the outgoing Chair of the Connect North Central Program.



# North Central Calendar of EVENTS

9/8/2023

**Good Morning North Central**  
Sponsored by bankHometown  
6:45 AM - 8:30 AM

9/12/2023

**2023 Chamber of the Year  
Celebration**  
3:00 PM - 5:00 PM

9/21/2023

**Legislative & Candidates  
Reception**  
5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

9/28/2023

**Business Exit Planning to Secure  
Your Retirement**  
8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

9/29/2023

**Connect North Central**  
8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

10/4/2023

**Work North Central  
Massachusetts Career  
& Hiring Event**  
10:00 AM - 1:00 PM

10/17/2023

**Business After Hours:**  
**AIS, Inc**  
5:00 PM – 7:00 PM

10/27/2023

**Connect North Central**  
8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

11/1/2023

**Congressional Luncheon**  
11:30 AM - 1:30 PM

11/10/2023

**Good Morning North Central**  
Sponsored by Montachusett  
Regional Vocational Technical  
School  
6:45 AM - 8:30 AM

A complete list of events with details can be found  
on our event calendar on [northcentralmass.com](http://northcentralmass.com).

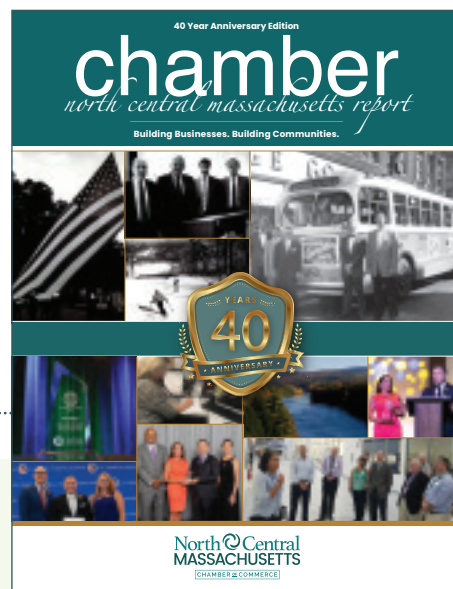
Please contact Kat Deal with any questions at  
978.353.7600 ext. 235 or via email at  
[kdeal@northcentralmass.com](mailto:kdeal@northcentralmass.com).

11/17/2023

**Connect North Central**  
8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

12/7/2023

**Winter Reception**  
5:00 PM – 7:00 PM



## 40th Anniversary Edition

**2024** will mark the North Central Massachusetts Chamber's 40th Anniversary! To help mark the occasion, the Chamber will be releasing a special edition of the Chamber Report in January celebrating this milestone.

A limited number of advertising opportunities will be available. Members interested in advertising in this commemorative edition should contact Yasmin Loft at [yloft@northcentralmass.com](mailto:yloft@northcentralmass.com) to reserve your spot!

# North Central MASSACHUSETTS

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