

North Central MASSACHUSETTS

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

August 9, 2024

Ms. Tracy Murphy
Senior Planner
Montachusett Regional Planning Commission
464 Abbott Avenue
Leominster, MA 01453

Dear Tracy,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) plan. As a key economic development partner in North Central Massachusetts, the Chamber is pleased to offer our feedback and recommendations to strengthen this crucial document. Our input is based on our extensive experience in the region and our commitment to fostering economic growth and resilience.

Overall, we believe the plan would benefit from greater alignment with existing state and regional economic development initiatives, as well as more comprehensive analysis of the region's economic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Specifically, we recommend:

- Incorporate a new section that explicitly outlines how the CEDS plan aligns with and supports broader state and regional economic development plans, such as the One North Central Regional Economic Development plan, the North Central MassHire Workforce Board's Regional Workforce Blueprint, and the state's Team Massachusetts economic development strategy. Including these plans as appendices would further demonstrate this coordination.
- On page 18, under tourism, add the Johnny Appleseed Trail Association DBA Visit North Central Massachusetts as a resource alongside the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT). Visit North Central Massachusetts is the official state designated destination marketing organization for the region and works closely with the MOTT, local municipalities and other stakeholders to promote the region. In addition, we would suggest also listing the Johnny Appleseed Visitors Center on Route 2 in Lancaster as a resource there.

- Expand the "Regional Economic Conditions Summary" to provide deeper insight into the region's key industries, assets, and challenges, drawing from the analyses conducted for the One North Central plan and the Workforce Board's studies. This will help establish stronger context for the goals and strategies in the CEDS.
- Expand the focus on manufacturing to provide greater context of this important industry for the region. Advanced manufacturing – which would include medical devices, cleantech and bio-pharmaceuticals - has been growing in the region and continues to play an oversized role in our regional economy.
- Highlight the diversity of the region's larger cities, noting that Latinos represent as much as 30% of the population in some of the cities. This demographic shift will have important economic and workforce implications that should be addressed.
- Broaden the scope of the identified priority themes and industries to include advanced manufacturing, healthcare, logistics/distribution, cleantech, tourism, and small business development. Innovation and entrepreneurship should also be emphasized as a key theme.
- While climate resilience is addressed, we would recommend expanding this section to also include economic resilience to cover strategies for addressing a wider range of potential disruptions, such as economic downturns and public health crises, not just climate change.
- Include a more comprehensive inventory of regional assets (e.g., educational institutions, research facilities, natural resources, workforce entities, regional economic development organizations) and how they can be leveraged for economic development. For example, there is no mention in the CEDS document of the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC), which is a federally certified Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), an SBA lender, the state designated Regional Economic Development Organization (REDO) and an RLF lender under the U.S. Economic Development Administration. As the official regional economic development organization for the region, we would recommend including the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC) within the document, particularly the sections dealing with the innovation/small business ecosystem and anything addressing economic resiliency. There are several other regional community and economic development related entities that were omitted from the document and should be included.

The Chamber is also excited to recommend the inclusion of several priority project ideas that align with the One North Central Regional Economic Development Plan, including:

- Funding for downtown and town center revitalization. Many of the local communities have identified downtown revitalization as a priority in their own planning. A regional approach towards supporting these projects would have benefits, such as collaboration on identifying and marketing smaller vacant spaces and educating municipal leaders on implementing flexible regulations (zoning, signage, parking, shared streets and public space, alcohol licensing, outdoor dining).
- A regional transportation priority project list developed with stakeholder input. This would help with advocating at the federal, state, regional and local levels for transportation projects that will benefit economic development in the region.

- Expanding water/sewer capacity to open up new development sites. We would suggest adding a study of regional sewer and water coverage and capacity to the list of priority projects with a goal of extending service and added capacity to open up new developable parcels in the region for economic development.
- Initiatives to improve broadband access and digital equity. This could include exploring branding a regional broadband network and working with providers to expand service under the coordinated brand. Or building a North Central Massachusetts network and leasing back to internet providers as a way to pay for last-mile connections and bridge digital divides for low- and moderate-income households.
- Creating a regional clearinghouse for economic development related grants, particularly EDA and other grant opportunities, to assist with awareness, grant coordination and collaboration. This would position the region to better compete for competitive resources.
- Engaging with municipal and regional leaders to create a centralized inventory of available spaces and properties. This would help to support efforts to market the region as a location for business expansion.

In addition, we strongly encourage the inclusion of the North Central Massachusetts Regional Business Investment Fund and the North Central Massachusetts Land Bank, Inc. as priority projects. These initiatives were highlighted in the One North Central plan and could benefit greatly from being incorporated into the CEDS.

We believe these recommendations will significantly enhance the CEDS plan's effectiveness. The Chamber is committed to working closely with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission and other stakeholders to implement this strategy and drive sustainable growth across North Central Massachusetts. We look forward to further discussions on how we can collaboratively shape our region's economic future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roy Nascimento', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Roy Nascimento, IOM, CCE
President & CEO