

Spring 2026 Edition

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*North Central Massachusetts*

# Chamber Report

Building Businesses. Building Communities.



## Regional Advocacy at Work



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CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

# Thank You to Our Leadership Circle

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce advances our region's economic vitality through the collective commitment of all our members. We extend special recognition to the businesses and institutions below whose enhanced investment enables us to expand our impact - from growing our lending programs and workforce initiatives to promoting our region as a destination for business and tourism. Thank you for your leadership in North Central Massachusetts.

## Regional Leaders



## Chamber Partners



# Chamber Report

a publication of  
The 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.

**About this Issue:** One of the most important, and often least visible, roles of a chamber of commerce is government affairs and advocacy. It's about making sure the voices of local employers are heard where decisions are made, policies are shaped, and the future of our communities is decided. In this edition's feature article, "Voice of Business," we pull back the curtain on what that work looks like here in North Central Massachusetts, and why it matters to you as a member.

From testifying at local hearings, to advocating on Beacon Hill for regional economic development funding and tourism investment, to engaging on federal issues like tariffs and tax policy, your Chamber is at the table every day ensuring that the interests of our hundreds of members are represented. Whether it's a city council vote that could shift your tax burden or state legislation that affects your health insurance costs, this is the work that protects your bottom line and strengthens our regional economy.

Inside these pages, you'll also find updates on tourism and economic development initiatives, news from our programs and events, and highlights from across our 27-community region.

## CHAMBER BOARD

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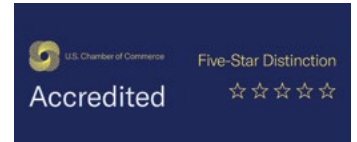
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# CHAMBER updates: Your Chamber in Action!

As your dynamic partner in North Central Massachusetts, we continue to drive initiatives that strengthen our business community and foster regional growth. Our impact spans from direct business support to innovative community development, and we are pleased to share these updates with you that are not covered elsewhere in the newsletter. For Tourism news, see page 20. Government Affairs updates are on page 10.



Recognition Series Honors Members.

## MEET & GREETINGS:

We have continued our Meet & Greet initiative, which provides valuable opportunities for local businesses to connect with Chamber staff, network with peers, and receive updates on Chamber initiatives and resources. These smaller, more casual gatherings are typically held outside our larger cities in venues that offer a less intimidating, more approachable environment than our larger breakfast series and networking events. During the Fall, we held Meet & Greet at three member golf course locations: **Templewood Golf Course** in Phillipston, **Settlers Green** in Lunenburg, and **Ellinwood Country Club** in Athol. In January, we hosted a Meet & Greet in downtown Athol in partnership with **Athol Credit Union** and the Polus Center, focusing on downtown revitalization efforts in the community. This outreach approach ensures businesses across our diverse geographic region have accessible opportunities to engage with the Chamber and strengthens our connection to the broader North Central Massachusetts business community. Reach out to the Chamber if you would be interested in hosting a Meet & Greet.



Athol Credit Union and the Polus Center hosted the Chamber Meet & Greet in Athol, providing a great opportunity to learn more about the Remake Main Street initiative while connecting local businesses, officials, and community leaders across the region.

## MEMBER RECOGNITION SERIES:

In 2025 we launched a recognition program honoring members celebrating major milestones or contributing to regional growth during our Good Morning North Central breakfast series. The program has been well received, with honorees featured at our September, November and January breakfasts. In September, we celebrated **Catania Oils** (125 years), **Fitchburg Art Museum** (100 years), **Foster-Healey Real Estate** (100 years), and presented a Community Enhancement Award to **NewVue Communities** for the transformational Fitchburg Arts Community project.

In November, we honored **Scouting America - Heart of New England Council** (100 years), **Busy Bees Preschool Center** (50 years), **Coakley Family Dental** (50 years), and presented a Community Enhancement Award to **The Tocci Group** for their redevelopment of the historic Foster-Healey Building in Fitchburg. At our January breakfast we recognized the **Rotary Club of Leominster** (100 years), **Devens Enterprise Commission** (30 years), and presented a Community Enhancement Award to **Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School** for the new MVP Academy. Recognition categories include business anniversaries,



Thank you to Ray LaFond as he concluded more than 40 years of service with the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation and our Chamber. Ray served as Clerk of the NCMDC Board of Directors and was an active member of our loan committee throughout his tenure. As former Vice President with Enterprise Bank & Trust, Ray brought invaluable financial expertise and steadfast commitment to supporting small business growth across our region.

leadership transitions, development projects, and community initiatives, with three to five honorees featured at each breakfast. **Nominations are accepted year-round on our website.**

**SMALL BUSINESS LENDING:**

Strong capital plus strong partnerships equals stronger communities, that's the formula driving the **North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation (NCMDC)**, our Chamber's economic development arm, as it expands access to crucial small business funding. The NCMDC loan portfolio currently stands at **90 active loans totaling \$3,355,409.17**, representing significant investment in local entrepreneurs who often can't secure traditional financing. Since the start of the NCMDC fiscal year on October 1, 2025, we have closed on a total of **5 loans totaling \$283,313**. These loans, ranging from \$18,000 to \$195,313, included 3 SBA loans and two EDA loans, creating or saving 49 jobs across our region while revitalizing properties and strengthening our shared economy. Beyond the direct impact, these strategic investments leveraged an additional \$380,814 from private sources and banking partners, multiplying every dollar invested. Looking ahead, momentum continues building with a robust pipeline. As of January 31, 2026, we have a total of **\$1,403,000 in our pipeline**, including two loans totaling \$300,000 that have

been approved but not yet closed; five loans totaling \$480,000 in loan requests being reviewed; and six loan requests totaling \$623,000 that are in the early stages and still awaiting review. NCMDC continues strengthening our regional business ecosystem, creating opportunities for all Chamber members through expanded customer bases and more robust supply chains.

**BUSINESS ASSISTANCE:**

Strong businesses build strong communities, and our economic development team continues proving that targeted support makes all the difference. Through the first quarter of the fiscal year, we've delivered **409 hours** of technical assistance to local entrepreneurs and small businesses, from ambitious startups to established operations ready to scale. Our comprehensive approach focuses on preparing businesses for financing success through our development corporation, providing both pre-loan guidance to strengthen applications and post-loan support to ensure sustainable growth. We also assist with marketing strategies and connecting businesses with the right resources at the right time. Beyond our direct support, we serve as connectors, linking businesses with specialized expertise through our partnerships with other resource partners. This collaborative network creates a ripple effect that strengthens our entire regional economy and benefits all Chamber members

through increased local business activity and job creation.

**TOURISM DESTINATION MARKETING DISTRICT:**

North Central Massachusetts' first Tourism Destination Marketing District officially launched on January 1, 2026, marking a significant milestone in our region's tourism development strategy. This business-led initiative gives participating hotels direct control over supplemental tourism promotion and investment. While the district's funds won't be received until late spring, planning is already underway. The Chamber has met with counterparts at MeetBoston to learn from their experience establishing their TDMD and has met with state Department of Revenue officials to finalize implementation details. Chamber staff are also meeting regularly with **Great Wolf Lodge** management to develop a strategic plan for deploying the funds effectively. This groundbreaking model reduces reliance on unpredictable state funding while creating sustainable, locally-driven marketing that will expand our tourism impact and strengthen the regional economy. Once the Fitchburg district is operational, we plan to explore expanding this proven model to other communities throughout the region, positioning North Central Massachusetts to compete more effectively for visitor

*Continued on page 6*

*Continued from page 5*

spending while giving participating hotels direct influence over promotional strategies that impact their bottom line.

### GIFT LOCAL GIFT CARD PROGRAM:

The Chamber's Gift Local program continues to support local businesses through a Mastercard-based e-gift card platform operated by Yiftee. In CY2025, **146 gift cards were sold**, representing **\$5,200** in local spending. During the same timeframe, **62 cards totaling \$2,666.72 were redeemed** at 21 participating merchant locations, reinforcing the Chamber's shop-local initiatives and business recognition efforts.

### SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM EXPANSION:

Investing in tomorrow's workforce starts with supporting today's students. As part of our strategic plan, the Chamber set an ambitious goal to significantly expand our Chamber Foundation's scholarship program to \$60,000 annually, and we're on track to meet or exceed it. Our scholarship campaign has gained remarkable momentum, with current projections indicating we'll award approximately **29 scholarships** this year, totaling **\$58,000**. This includes both traditional and non-traditional scholarships funded through corporate sponsorships and endowed scholarships, with all scholarships to be presented at our annual Scholars Breakfast in May 2026. We're grateful to all the members who have stepped forward to contribute to the sponsorship fund or sponsor a full scholarship, your investment in local students makes a direct difference. Our scholarship committee deserves recognition for their proactive work cultivating sponsors to support students pursuing vocational training, certificates, and alternative career pathways leading to in-demand regional jobs. By expanding our scholarship program, we're investing in the future prosperity of North Central Massachusetts and ensuring local young people have the resources to build successful careers right here at home. We continue actively seeking additional sponsors and welcome member participation in this important initiative.



In January and early February, the NCM Rides newly formed TMA connected with hospital employees through a virtual session for Clinton Hospital and two in person events at Heywood Hospital and Athol Hospital. Employees stopped by to learn about the TMA and the commuter programs now available, including eCommuter ride matching, which helps staff find carpool partners, and the Emergency Ride Home program for added peace of mind. The TMA is continuing to roll out new initiatives aimed at making commuting easier, more affordable, and more sustainable for hospital employees across the region.

### MANUFACTURING DIRECTORY:

Manufacturing remains a priority for our organization, and we're excited to share that our North Central Massachusetts Manufacturing Directory is in its final stages. After some delays, our staff is putting the finishing touches on this valuable resource, and we anticipate it will be available this spring. This will be the most comprehensive and locally-focused compilation of manufacturing information in the region, serving as an essential guide for businesses, economic development professionals, and organizations looking to connect with local manufacturers. The directory **showcases manufacturers, suppliers, and service providers to the manufacturing industry**, promoting their capabilities and helping them connect with potential customers and partners. This reference guide will be used throughout the year, providing lasting value and targeted exposure to decision-makers in the manufacturing community. The directory underscores our region's manufacturing strength and helps businesses discover the depth of industrial capabilities available right here in North Central Massachusetts.

### JOBS BOARD:

Whether hiring for growth or filling key positions, our WorkNorthCentral.com jobs board continues to serve as a vital resource for Chamber members seeking qualified regional talent. In 2025, the platform facilitated over **1,511 job postings** and generated more

than **35,773 page views** across **7,149 user sessions**, demonstrating strong engagement from job seekers throughout the region. The momentum has continued into 2026, with January alone seeing **881 job postings, 21,093 page views, and 4,502 sessions**. Chamber members can post unlimited job openings at no cost, providing a valuable marketing channel for employment opportunities while supporting regional workforce retention and growth. Submit your listings today!

### SOLAR INITIATIVE:

Sustainability initiatives that deliver tangible economic benefits exemplify our practical approach to supporting regional business needs. Since launching in August 2014, our solar initiative has generated over 16 million kWh in net metering credits through December 2025. These credits have a total value of \$4,044,326, resulting in cumulative savings of **\$3,437,677 for participating manufacturers**. As a participant, the Chamber has benefited directly, realizing \$323,546 in energy cost savings to date. This collaborative program continues to demonstrate how Chamber initiatives can deliver substantial, ongoing financial benefits to member businesses while supporting regional sustainability goals. As energy costs continue to rise, this program's success highlights our commitment to developing creative solutions that strengthen our members' bottom lines while positioning our region as forward-thinking and environmentally responsible.



It has been a busy season for ribbon cuttings! Chamber staff joined Workers Credit Union in February to celebrate the grand opening of their new Merriam Ave. location in Leominster, one of more than 22 celebrations hosted across the region since September 2025.

**TRANSPORTATION MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION:**

Solving transportation challenges takes collaboration, and our new **North Central Massachusetts Rides Transportation Management Association (TMA)** is already making significant progress. Since launching as a Chamber affiliate, the TMA has contracted with TransAction Associates to provide professional management and expertise for program implementation. The TMA board has been meeting regularly to build the foundation for this innovative partnership and has launched a website to serve as a central resource for the initiative. The organization has developed **ridesharing resources** and an **emergency ride program** to provide immediate support for employees facing transportation barriers. Looking ahead, the TMA has applied for grant funding with hopes of launching its first **shuttle service** to address critical last-mile transportation gaps connecting workers to employers.

The TMA is currently conducting a series of educational outreach events at participating member companies to ensure employees understand the transportation resources available to them. This business-led solution demonstrates how regional collaboration can turn individual challenges into collective action, creating the transportation access our region's businesses need to attract and retain talent.

**RIBBON CUTTINGS:**

Celebrating member success stories strengthens our entire business community. The Chamber held an exceptional 22 ribbon cuttings between September 1, 2025, and the end of January 2026, averaging one event per week. This remarkable pace showcases the vitality and growth happening across North Central Massachusetts. Recent celebrations since our last edition include **Workers Credit Union's** new branch in Fitchburg, **Xochimilco**

**Mexican Cuisine, Canvas by Coff33 Corp, Identity Coffee, and Habitat for Humanity ReStore** in Leominster, along with numerous other new business openings, relocations, and significant anniversaries across the region. Each of these celebrations represents investment in our region, job creation, and enhanced services for residents and businesses alike. We're proud to stand alongside our members as they reach these important milestones and look forward to celebrating many more success stories in the year ahead. If your business is planning an expansion, relocation, or significant milestone, contact us to explore how a Chamber ribbon cutting can amplify your announcement and connect you with the broader business community.

*We value your input on how the Chamber can better support your organizations! Share your thoughts at [rmascimento@northcentralmass.com](mailto:rmascimento@northcentralmass.com).* ◇

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# NEW NORTH CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS CHAMBER MEMBERS

**Aerialicious Entertainment**

Gina DeFreitas  
Leominster Local  
Leominster, MA 01453  
ARTS, CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

**BE Proofreading**

Bonnie Echmalian  
69A Worcester Road  
Sterling, MA 01564  
BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES BUSINESS SERVICE

**CAPS Collaborative**

Mindy LeBlanc  
690 Mechanic Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
EDUCATION PUBLIC SCHOOLS/ PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS

**Centrica Business Solutions**

Regina Durga  
2111 Ellsworth Blvd.  
Malta, NY 12020  
PUBLIC UTILITIES AND ENVIRONMENT ENERGY/SOLAR

**City on a Hill Arts, Inc.**

Debbie Moylan  
268 Washington Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
ARTS, CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATION

**CoFF33 Corp.**

Derek Craig  
326 Main Street  
Fitchburg, MA 01420  
ARTS, CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATION

**CrossCountry Mortgage**

Sarah Costa  
81 Hartwell Avenue  
Lexington, MA 02421  
FINANCE AND INSURANCE MORTGAGE COMPANY

**Diligent DMC**

Chris Kosteck  
1 Main Street, Suite 13  
Lunenburg, MA 01462  
ADVERTISING AND MEDIA MARKETING

**Dragons and Crystals, Inc.**

L Shay Bradham  
Events are held at  
15 West Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND NON-PROFIT NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

**Gallery At 759 Main**

Roy Crawford  
759 Main Street  
Fitchburg, MA 01420  
ARTS, CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT ART GALLERIES/MUSEUMS

**Identity Coffee Fitchburg**

Ever Feliciano  
35 Main Street  
Fitchburg, MA 01420  
RESTAURANTS, FOOD AND BEVERAGES

**Leominster Rotary**

Louise Hogue  
555 Central Street  
P.O. Box 867  
Leominster, MA 01453  
FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND NON-PROFIT NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

**Level Up Promotions, LLC.**

Caleb Joseph  
197 Mill Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES EMBROIDERY

**Liberty Square Group**

Jennifer Flanagan Long  
80 Sherman Street  
Cambridge, MA 02140  
GOVERNMENT

**North Central Mass Farmers Markets**

Shelby Renaud  
85 Shady Avenue  
Westminster, MA 01473  
FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND NON-PROFIT NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

**Packard Hill Counseling Associates LLC**

Dr. Philip M. Papoojian  
56 Main Street  
153 Packard Hill Road  
Ashburnham, MA 01430  
HEALTH CARE AND MEDICAL MENTAL HEALTH

**PD Boucher Concrete Foundations**

Debbie Boucher  
712 Main Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
CONSTRUCTION CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

**Rockwell Roofing, Inc.**

Wade Wormann  
44 Pond Street  
Leominster, MA 01453  
REAL ESTATE AND CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTOR

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Ben Minsk  
184 W Boylston Street  
West Boylston, MA 01583  
SPORTS AND RECREATION

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Leominster, MA 01453  
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Sterling, MA 01564  
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Lancaster, MA 01523  
GOVERNMENT MUNICIPALITIES

NOVEMBER – JANUARY

## WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

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# CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

## Connect. Network. Learn.

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Questions? Contact Valerie Bruno: 978.353.7600 ext. 235 | [vbruno@northcentralmass.com](mailto:vbruno@northcentralmass.com)



# GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS UPDATE

## ADVOCACY IN ACTION



Chamber staff joined state officials recently for a tour of AIS in Leominster as part of the Chamber's ongoing advocacy and member engagement efforts.

As we enter 2026 the Chamber has continued strengthening local relationships and advocating for a supportive business climate while turning attention to the legislative session on Beacon Hill.

### LOCAL ADVOCACY

November's elections saw three new additions to area city councils: Joe Bowen, Ward 3 Councilor in Fitchburg; Kevin Starr, Councilor-at-Large in Fitchburg; and Eladia Romero, Ward 1 Councilor in Leominster. At the start of the new year, the Chamber met with the three of them individually to talk about their priorities as well as make them aware of the work the Chamber and our affiliates do, establishing the Chamber, our affiliates and our members as partners and resources for the city

and their constituents.

In addition to regularly attending city council meetings in Fitchburg and Leominster, the Chamber also provided testimony in Clinton and Lancaster in December as the two communities prepared to set their tax rates for 2026. In Clinton, Chamber staff advocated for a continued shift towards a single tax rate, a direction the Town had been closing a gap on

for a number of years up until the pandemic. While their Select Board would ultimately vote to maintain their current split, they did vote down an effort to increase the split. The Chamber provided testimony in Lancaster countering several pieces of testimony that advocated for a move to a split rate. Lancaster's Select Board ultimately voted to maintain their single rate.

Tax shifting does not generate new revenue, it simply moves who pays the total levy, and in our experience, these split rates tend to drive businesses out over the long term, creating a downward spiral where the remaining tax base (both commercial and residential) must absorb the loss. Most communities in the region maintain single tax rates, and those few that adopted split rates have either moved back to single rates or are actively working to eliminate them.

The Chamber also continues to advocate with the Mazzarella administration in Leominster to restore tourism funding that was cut from the city's budget, an issue we reported on in our Winter edition.

### STATE ADVOCACY

As budget season commences on Beacon Hill, the Chamber is actively

## LEARN MORE

Access the Chamber's government affairs resources, legislative contacts, and policy positions at [northcentralmass.com/government-affairs](http://northcentralmass.com/government-affairs).



advocating for priorities to support the small business community and our regional economic development and tourism marketing efforts.

Last year, regional economic development funding, which supports small business lending, technical assistance, and workforce programs across the region, was vetoed by the Governor, only for the legislature to overturn the veto. We have been actively engaging the administration to underscore its importance for economic growth and regional equity.

Working with a coalition of regional tourism groups, we also continue to advocate for the modernization of the Tourism Trust Fund. Legislation filed would direct 2.5% of the state's room occupancy excise revenue to the fund, which has remained flat for over ten years and is effectively a significant cut due to inflation. We are pushing to index the fund to room tax collections, as many other states do, ensuring revenue from the lodging

industry is reinvested into tourism marketing, an update that is essential for our region's competitive position.

In January, the Chamber joined a coalition of more than 25 employer and trade associations from across the Commonwealth in a letter to House leadership expressing concerns with proposed consumer data privacy legislation. While the coalition supports a comprehensive framework that safeguards consumer privacy, the letter urged lawmakers to ensure the legislation balances consumer protections with employer feasibility and compliance costs, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses. ♦

*For information about the Chamber's public policy work, contact Public Affairs Director Travis Condon at 978.353.7600, ext. 224, or [tcondon@northcentralmass.com](mailto:tcondon@northcentralmass.com).*







Chamber President & CEO Roy Nascimento and Public Affairs Director Travis Condon met with newly elected area city councilors as part of the Chamber's ongoing outreach efforts at the start of the new year, including Fitchburg Ward 3 Councilor Joe Bowen (top left), Fitchburg Councilor Kevin Starr (top right), and Leominster Ward 1 Councilor Eladia Romero (bottom right).

## WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE LATEST NEWS AND EVENTS?

If so then check out [northcentralmass.com](http://northcentralmass.com) to see community updates such as who's hiring, business accomplishments, and events you can participate in!

# Out & About

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The Chamber hosted its **10th Annual Congressional Lunch**, bringing together Congressional representatives with our members to discuss federal issues.



The **Community Leadership Institute** Class of 2026 met in January at Fitchburg Access Television for a session on Media & Crisis Communications, focused on leading cross-generational teams.



The Chamber celebrated the grand opening of Habitat for Humanity North Central Massachusetts' new **ReStore** in Leominster, where every purchase of gently used home goods and building materials helps support safe, affordable housing for local families.



In February, the Chamber staff were in attendance to help our friends at **Workers Credit Union** celebrate the grand opening on their new Merriam Avenue location in Leominster.



The Chamber visited **Chopsticks Restaurant and Bar** for a conversation with owner Christina Xing about her journey from a global career to leading this 40-year community staple, and how she is honoring its legacy while introducing new experiences for Leominster.

## CHAMBER EVENTS

If you would like to view more upcoming events visit [northcentralmass.com!](https://www.northcentralmass.com)



The Chamber hosted its **Quarterly Roundtable on Company Culture**, bringing together business owners and leaders for an open, collaborative conversation focused on building stronger teams, sharing real-world experiences, and developing practical strategies to strengthen company culture and drive growth.



The Chamber joined **Making Opportunity Count (MOC) Inc.** for a podcast discussing workforce development, small business support, and the importance of mentoring and empowering youth to build strong career pathways and long-term economic opportunity in North Central Massachusetts.



Chamber Director of Public Affairs Travis Condon spoke at **Clinton's tax classification** hearing to advocate for competitive business tax rates. As the only business organization to testify, the Chamber ensured the local business community had a strong voice at the table.



The Chamber and community leaders joined the **Twin Cities Rail Trail Association** to celebrate the completion of Phase 3 in Leominster, with the new trail endpoint at Water Street and Depot Square now officially open.



The Chamber visited **LUK, Inc.** to speak with Executive Director Beth Barto and her team about the services they have provided for more than 55 years to support youth, families, and adults across the region, including their Youth Mentoring Program and ways the community can get involved.



The Chamber hosted its **Women's Leadership Connection Mini Experience**, The Self-Love Lounge, bringing together local women for an intimate evening focused on health, wellness, and meaningful connection.



The Chamber hosted a Meet & Greet at **Xochimilco Mexican Cuisine**, bringing together local businesses for networking and conversation while sharing updates from the Chamber and connecting with members in the community.



The Chamber celebrated Eric Chouinard's official office opening in Gardner as the newest advisor with **Edward Jones**, now leading his own practice and ready to serve the local community.



The Chamber joined **Marcello's** one year anniversary, welcoming the community to enjoy authentic Italian and Greek cuisine, from classic pastas and pizzas to gyros, seafood, and desserts, bringing the flavors of Italy and Greece to North Central Massachusetts.



**Colonial West Chevrolet** hosted the "Fill a Truck for Families in Need" food drive, and the Chamber was proud to see the incredible generosity of our community in action. All donations collected went to local pantries to support families in need.



**Fidelity Bank** awarded \$15,000 in grants to local nonprofits, including \$5,000 to The Spanish American Center in Leominster.



The Chamber hosted its **Women's Leadership Connection Luncheon**, bringing together professionals from across the region for an inspiring conversation with local nonprofit leaders.



The Chamber celebrated the grand opening of **Pop by Posh**, a creative event studio providing balloon décor, luxury backdrops, and themed party experiences.

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# The Voice of Business:

## *From Town Halls to Capitol Hill*

### The Chamber's advocacy work continues to deliver results for members at every level of government.

As a member of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, you have a powerful coalition advocating on your behalf every single day. From the halls of the State House to city council chambers and town halls across our 27-community region, your Chamber is working to create a better business climate, find new opportunities for economic growth, and address the challenges you face.



Chamber President Roy Nascimento testifying before the Fitchburg City Council recently on issues impacting local businesses.

### Why Advocacy Matters

In today's complex regulatory environment, businesses face numerous challenges: rising health insurance costs, burdensome regulations, workforce shortages, tax policies and infrastructure needs that all impact competitiveness and daily operations. Individual businesses simply don't have the time, resources, or access to effectively advocate for themselves at multiple levels of government.

Through your Chamber, you have a voice to ensure policymakers understand how their decisions can positively (or negatively) affect your business. With advocacy that is practical and not partisan, we are committed to supporting your business success and advancing economic growth across North Central Massachusetts.

Organizations aimed to leverage business interests are important allies on statewide and federal policy, but what they cannot offer is boots-on-the-ground knowledge that makes our region unique. Whether testifying at tax hearings in Lancaster, monitoring City Council meetings in Leominster

and Fitchburg, or addressing zoning reforms in Sterling, we represent local employers, entrepreneurs and job creators. It's this grassroots authenticity, combined with our deep knowledge of regional priorities and our relationships, that makes the Chamber's advocacy uniquely powerful and an essential resource for your business.

"Our members are dealing with real challenges every day, from finding qualified workers to managing rising costs to navigating complex regulations," says Tony Fields, president, **ClearTech Group** in Leominster, and chair of the Chamber's board of directors. "They don't have time to keep up with what's happening at City Hall, the State House, and in Washington. That's exactly what the Chamber does for us, and they deliver results."

### Advocacy Impact

Over the past two years, we've secured important victories and advanced key priorities to directly benefit our members and our region. At the local level, we've protected businesses from increased tax burdens

by successfully advocating for favorable tax policies. At the federal level, we worked with a coalition of business groups to ensure provisions beneficial to manufacturers and small businesses were included in comprehensive tax legislation.

After extensive advocacy and collaboration with Great Wolf Lodge, we also achieved unanimous Fitchburg City Council approval for the region's first Tourism Destination Marketing District outside Boston. This groundbreaking initiative will generate sustainable funding for tourism promotion, driving visitor spending to benefit participating hotels, as well as restaurants, retail establishments, and other attractions throughout the region. We're now working to expand this successful model to additional communities. In the same vein, the Chamber continues advocating for state tourism trust fund reforms that would provide critical resources for regional promotion and support our communities.

We have been at the forefront of efforts to secure economic development funding for the region, working closely



Chamber leadership pictured with members of the Senate delegation and Anne Gobi, now Director of Rural Affairs, following a meeting at the Massachusetts State House.



Members of the North Central Massachusetts legislative delegation pictured with Chamber leadership following a legislative briefing at the Chamber's offices.

with our legislative delegation and state economic development officials, including recent meetings with the Lieutenant Governor and other administration officials, to ensure that North Central Massachusetts receives the resources needed to support business growth and community development projects.

## On the Ground, Every Day

While policy wins make headlines, much of our most valuable advocacy work happens behind the scenes. Our staff routinely attends city council meetings in Fitchburg and Leominster to monitor issues affecting our members and provide real-time input on business concerns. But we don't limit our focus to the region's two largest communities, we maintain active relationships with municipal leaders across all 27 communities we serve, from Athol to Groton.

In the past year alone, we've testified before city and towns during discussions on taxes, zoning reforms, tourism and economic development matters, and provided expert testimony on numerous other local policy issues.

On Beacon Hill, we have testified on rising health insurance rates for businesses, a critical concern for employers trying to provide competitive benefits while managing costs. We've also testified in support of legislation that would bring passenger rail improvements and economic development opportunities to North Central Massachusetts and advocated for realistic timelines on electric vehicle mandates that balance environmental

goals with practical business concerns.

"People don't always see the day-to-day work that goes into effective advocacy," notes Michelle Haggstrom, of **Keller Williams North Central**, chair of the Chamber's Government Affairs Committee, "but when the Chamber testifies on health insurance costs or works to secure funding for regional economic development, it directly impacts our ability to run successful businesses and strengthen our communities."

We maintain regular communication with our state legislators, briefing them on regional priorities and connecting them with members. Through state and national chamber networks, including the U.S. Chamber's Committee of 100, we ensure North Central Massachusetts has a seat at the table where critical decisions are made.

## Individual Member Support

Beyond big-picture policy advocacy, we provide expert, hands-on support to individual members facing specific regulatory or policy challenges. When members need help navigating permitting processes, resolving compliance issues, accessing tax incentive programs, or connecting with the right officials, we take action.

"When concern grew among plastics manufacturers about proposed legislation to ban single-use plastics, one call to the Chamber was all it took," says Lisa Rocheleau, treasurer, **Rocheleau Tool & Die Company**. "They immediately organized meetings with legislators to help them understand

how these proposals would impact our local industry and the broader regional economy, and to explore more balanced approaches to sustainability. Rather than waiting for legislation to happen to us, the Chamber's proactive advocacy helped us get ahead of it and have a constructive dialogue."

"The value of the Chamber's advocacy really hit home for me during the ballot question on tipped wages at the end of 2024," shares John Amaral, owner, **The Groton Inn** and **Forge and Vine Restaurant**. "The Chamber immediately took the time to understand how the question would impact our business and our employees, connected us with the right people locally, and really leaned into educating local stakeholders on the potential impact. That kind of advocacy makes a real difference for our business."

## The Value Proposition

Your Chamber membership spreads the cost of government engagement across more than 650 members while amplifying our collective voice. For most businesses, maintaining relationships with officials, monitoring legislation, and testifying at hearings would be impossible individually. Together, we make it work.

## Your Role

Effective advocacy requires your engagement, input and expertise about your industry and business needs. Throughout the year, we host forums,

*Continued on page 18*

*Continued from page 17*

breakfast meetings, and legislative events to bring policymakers directly to you.

We encourage you to maximize the value of the Chamber's advocacy efforts by staying informed through our updates and meetings, sharing your story when we ask for examples of how policies impact real businesses, participating in our events to build relationships with policymakers, responding when we issue calls to action on critical legislation, and letting us know when you're facing a regulatory or policy issue.

## The Bottom Line

Every day, your Chamber is working to create a better business climate in North Central Massachusetts. From testifying on health insurance costs at the State House to monitoring local zoning discussions, from securing funding for regional initiatives to helping members navigate bureaucratic challenges, we're your voice wherever it matters most.

"This is what sets great chambers apart," says Roy Nascimento, president and CEO, **North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce**. "It's not just about ribbon cuttings and networking events, although those matter too. It's about showing up wherever decisions are being made that affect our members' ability to succeed. That's the commitment we make to each member every single day."

This is advocacy in action. This is what your membership supports. This is what makes the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce an essential partner in your business success.

Have a policy issue affecting your business? A question about upcoming legislation? Want to connect with a specific elected official? Contact Travis Condon, director of public affairs, at [tcondon@northcentralmass.com](mailto:tcondon@northcentralmass.com) or call (978) 353-7600.

Your voice matters, and we're here to amplify it. ◇



Congressman Jim McGovern tours Chamber member AIS to see firsthand how local manufacturers are driving the regional economy.



Members tour the Massachusetts State House during the Chamber's annual Beacon Hill visit.



Meeting with members of our legislative delegation on an annual CLI Beacon Hill visit to advocate for North Central Massachusetts businesses.



Chamber members and legislators gather at the Groton Inn to discuss the 2024 ballot question on tipped wages and its potential impact on local restaurants and hospitality businesses (left), and Chamber staff testify before the Lancaster Select Board in December 2025 in support of maintaining the community's single tax rate (right).



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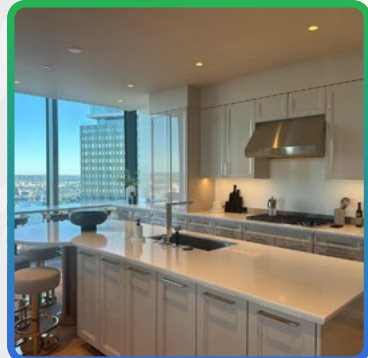
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# TOURISM

## Update

### Visit North Central Massachusetts

A recap of efforts through the spring from the Chamber's destination marketing arm, Visit North Central Massachusetts (VNCM).

#### Strategic Marketing Plan & Recovery Momentum

As we move through FY2026, Visit North Central Massachusetts has regained full momentum following the delayed state contract and matching funding that impacted our fall operations. After receiving our contract and funding in early December 2025, we immediately executed our winter and spring marketing initiatives with emphasis on making up ground from the delayed start.

Our comprehensive FY2026 marketing strategy remains centered on positioning North Central Massachusetts as an accessible, high-value New England destination. Our core brand message, "Everything You Love About New England... A Lot Closer to Home," continues to drive campaign creative, while our "Drive to, not through, North Central MA" initiative reinforces the region as a destination in its own right.

Strategic media partnerships with AAA, Hearst, Boston Magazine,



The Johnny Appleseed statue outside the region's Visitor Center in Lancaster shows the last traces of winter, a fitting image as the region shifts into its busy spring and summer tourism season. The center welcomed nearly 77,000 visitors in FY2026 to date.

Yankee Magazine, Edible Boston, LocalIQ, and PlayEasy will amplify our spring campaigns. With funding secured, we resumed paid and sponsored advertising alongside our strong organic social presence, positioning ourselves for the critical spring and summer tourism seasons.

#### Website Performance

For November - January of FY2026, VisitNorthCentral.com attracted 11,363 users (-46.42% compared to the same period in FY25) and generated 17,518 pageviews

(-57.14% change year-over-year). Impressions totaled 487,000 (down 28.79% year-over-year).

These numbers reflect the delayed state matching funds, a winter season that brought some of the most significant snowfall and travel disruptions the Northeast has seen in years, and broader economic uncertainty that continued to dampen travel demand. As our SEM, Targeting, and Sponsored partnerships activate in March and April we expect to see an increase across all of our performance metrics.

The site continues to serve as the primary hub for trip planning, featuring refreshed seasonal content, expanded blog storytelling about spring experiences, and a continuously updated regional events calendar highlighting spring festivals, outdoor recreation, and cultural happenings.

#### Social Media Performance

We maintained strong engagement across our social platforms from November through January, building a community that actively

engages with content about regional attractions, spring events, and member businesses.

Our combined Facebook and Instagram following for Visit North Central Massachusetts now tops 49,000 followers. While reduced paid advertising during the funding delay impacted overall Facebook reach, organic content continued to perform well and Instagram saw strong growth in both impressions and engagement. We expect momentum to build further as we resume paid campaigns and expand into video content later in the year.

### Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center

The Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center welcomed 8,965 visitors in November, 7,016 visitors in December, and 6,202 visitors in January, bringing the fiscal year 2026 total to 76,867 visitors.

The center continues to serve as a vital front-door asset for the region, welcoming travelers and serving as a promotional platform for local businesses, attractions, and events. These numbers reflect the center's role as a gateway to our region and a key touchpoint for introducing visitors to member businesses and regional attractions.

### Lodging Performance

According to the latest data from STR and AirDNA covering July

## Why Tourism Matters to North Central Massachusetts

Tourism is far more than a single industry—it's a catalyst for community vitality. When you build a place where people want to visit, you've built a place where people want to live, work, and invest. Every visitor we attract becomes a potential business lead, future resident, or investor who experiences our region's unique assets and becomes an ambassador for North Central Massachusetts.

This is why our strategic marketing efforts don't just drive immediate economic impact, they build long-term awareness and prosperity for our communities and members.

2025 through January 2026, the North Central Massachusetts lodging market saw modest declines consistent with broader national trends, as economic uncertainty continued to weigh on travel demand.

Hotels in the region posted occupancy of 66.1% and an average daily rate of \$166.46, with revenue per available room at \$110.11, reflecting a 5.3% decline in total revenue year-over-year. A slight increase in room supply alongside softer demand accounted for most of the performance gap.

Short-term rentals told a more mixed story. While occupancy and RevPAR dipped modestly, total revenue grew 9.1% year-over-year, driven by a 14.1% increase in supply and an 8.7% rise in demand. As our spring and summer marketing campaigns gain momentum, we expect lodging performance across the region to

strengthen through the peak travel season.

### Local Option Tax Collections

Several communities in the North Central region recently adopted local option meal tax collections, yielding significant increases in 2025. Local option meals tax collections for October–December of 2025 amounted to \$1.1M, a +97.0% increase year-over-year.

Meanwhile, room tax collections were \$681.5k, a -8.3% change year-over-year, mirroring the lodging performance dip. These tax revenues directly support local government services and serve as indicators of visitor spending patterns and tourism's economic impact on our communities.

### Looking Ahead to Summer 2026

As we move into the peak summer and fall

seasons, we're focused on maximizing the momentum built through our winter and spring campaigns. Having recovered from the delayed state funding, we're now operating at full capacity with integrated marketing strategies designed to capture high-intent travelers during their planning window.

Our summer initiatives will emphasize:

**Multi-Day Experiences:** Showcasing North Central Massachusetts as more than a day trip, highlighting overnight stays, extended itineraries, and immersive experiences that support local lodging and dining partners.

**Outdoor Recreation & Agritourism:** Promoting hiking, biking, water activities, farm visits, and

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*Continued from page 21*

farmers markets that capture summer travel motivators and family-friendly activities.

**Event-Driven Tourism:**

Collaborating with regional partners to promote signature summer festivals, fairs, concerts, and cultural events through coordinated digital campaigns and social storytelling.

**Sports Tourism Growth:**

Building on our PlayEasy momentum to attract youth tournaments and amateur sporting events that drive mid-week stays and shoulder season demand.

**Strategic Digital Investment:**

Continuing paid search, display advertising, and social campaigns along the Route 2 corridor to capture in-market travelers at critical decision points.



A full-page advertisement in Edible Boston highlights the region's growing food and beverage scene, from farm-to-table dining to local orchards, wineries, and breweries.

Our distribution of the *Guide to North Central Massachusetts* continues across hundreds of high-traffic locations throughout New England, while the digital edition extends reach through our website, email communications, and social channels. This lifestyle-focused publication remains a key tool in shaping perception of the

region as a complete destination experience.

We're building on strong organic social engagement with enhanced content for group travel, family experiences, and seasonal attractions. Media partnerships will amplify our reach during the highest-volume travel planning period of the year.

By combining targeted advertising, authentic storytelling, visitor services, and collaborative promotion, Visit North Central Massachusetts will continue working to increase awareness, drive website engagement, and inspire more travelers to choose North Central Massachusetts as their summer destination. ◊

# Chamber Ambassadors Committee

Interested in connecting your business to hundreds of member businesses and organizations across the region while supporting the Chamber's mission? The Chamber Ambassadors Committee could be a great fit for you!

The Ambassadors Committee is a volunteer committee that meets monthly to serve fellow members by sharing information, resources, and member-to-member support while increasing awareness and encouraging active participation in programs and services offered by the largest business and community development organization in the region.

*For more information, contact us at 978.353.7600 ext. 222.*

# MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

With a full slate of events planned through the spring and summer, here are a few signature events you won't want to miss.

## Small Business Showcase & Entrepreneur Awards Reception

**April 1, 2026 | 5:00–7:00 PM**  
DoubleTree by Hilton, Leominster

Celebrate the entrepreneurs and small businesses driving innovation and job creation across our region. The evening features a small business showcase, networking, and the presentation of Entrepreneur Awards honoring outstanding local businesses and leaders.

## 14th Annual Economic Forecast Breakfast

**April 16, 2026 | 7:30–9:30 AM**  
Great Wolf Lodge, Fitchburg

Get the insights you need to plan ahead with an exceptional panel of experts spanning national, state, and regional perspectives.

## Annual Scholars Breakfast

**May 8, 2026 | 7:15–9:30 AM**  
Great Wolf Lodge, Fitchburg

Join us as we celebrate 29 outstanding regional high school seniors receiving \$58,000 in scholarships from the Chamber Foundation. Hosted once again by emcee Maria Milagros.

## 42nd Annual Meeting & Business Expo

**June 11, 2026**  
Great Wolf Lodge, Fitchburg

Our signature event of the year brings together members, community leaders, and partners to celebrate the year's accomplishments and look ahead to what's next for North Central Massachusetts.

These are just a few of the events, programs, and networking opportunities the Chamber has planned for the months ahead. Head to [northcentralmass.com](http://northcentralmass.com) for a full calendar of upcoming events and to register. For information on any of our events or available sponsorship opportunities, contact Events & Programs Manager Valerie Bruno at [vbruno@northcentralmass.com](mailto:vbruno@northcentralmass.com) or 978.353.7600, ext. 235.



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# Welcome to the Team:

## Four New Additions at the Chamber!



Jessica Yakusik.



Cory Wells.



Jon Ashley.



Oriana Cabas Jimenez.

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber has welcomed four new team members, reinforcing our commitment to serving the regional business community.

**Corina "Cory" Wells** has joined the North Central Massachusetts

Development Corporation (NCMDC) as Loan Operations Administrator. She will manage NCMDC's microlending and revolving loan fund operations, working with borrowers and lending partners while ensuring compliance with program requirements. Wells brings significant experience in operations management,

lending, and grant-funded program administration, most recently serving as Energy Operations and Vendor Coordinator at Community Action of Pioneer Valley, where she oversaw more than \$12 million in grant-funded programs. She holds an MBA with a focus on community economic development from

Southern New Hampshire University.

**Jon Ashley** joins as Marketing and Communications Manager, overseeing marketing and communications strategy across the Chamber and its affiliates. He will also play a key role in the new Fitchburg Tourism Destination

Marketing District, which launched January 1, 2026. Ashley brings versatile experience in content creation, brand storytelling, and digital marketing, most recently serving as Sales Marketing and Business Development Manager at Celerity DCX, and previously as Associate Director of Marketing and Communications at Cushing Academy. He holds a master's degree from Boston University and a bachelor's degree from

the University of Chester in the United Kingdom.

**Jessica Yakusik** has joined as Executive Assistant, providing board support and administrative services for the Chamber and its affiliates while serving as the main point of contact for members. With more than 11 years of operations and administrative experience, she comes to the Chamber from CapEx FSC, LLC in Leominster, where she

managed daily office and warehouse operations. She is currently pursuing an associate's degree in business administration at Mount Wachusett Community College.

**Oriana Cabas Jimenez** joined the Chamber as an intern for the Spring 2026 semester. A communications media major with a minor in graphic design at Fitchburg State University, her internship continues the Chamber's

longstanding partnership with FSU's communications department. "These four additions strengthen our ability to serve our members and advance the economy of North Central Massachusetts," said Chamber President & CEO Roy Nascimento. "Each brings unique skills and experience that will enhance our work across economic development, marketing, administration, and community engagement." ◇



## DID YOU KNOW?

The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce is one of only three accredited chambers in Massachusetts. Nationally, fewer than 205 of the 7,000+ chambers across the country hold this distinction. Accreditation reflects our commitment to the highest standards of performance, expertise, and impact for the benefit of our members and communities.

## EVERYONE DESERVES THE OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE

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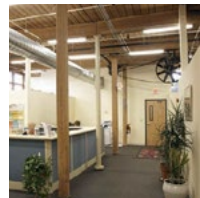
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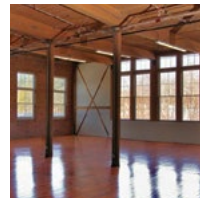
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## Featured Member

# ATHOL CREDIT UNION 95 Years of Community Trust



The Athol Credit Union team, continuing a tradition of community-focused service since 1930.

**F**or 95 years, Athol Credit Union (ACU) has served as a stable and trusted financial institution for individuals and families in Athol and throughout the North Quabbin region. Established in 1930, ACU has remained firmly committed to the credit union philosophy of people helping people, providing reliable financial services while maintaining a strong focus on community partnership and member well-being.

### A FOUNDATION OF TRUST, INTEGRITY, AND MEMBER SERVICE

As a member-owned financial institution, Athol Credit Union operates with a clear mission centered on trust, integrity, and long-term financial stability for its members.

What distinguishes Athol Credit Union is its commitment to delivering **individualized, high-quality service**. Each member relationship is approached with **care** and **professionalism**, ensuring financial solutions are tailored to meet specific goals and circumstances.

ACU offers a comprehensive range of competitive financial products designed to meet the evolving needs of its membership, including secure deposit services and personalized lending solutions.

In addition, ACU places a strong emphasis on financial education, providing resources and guidance that empower members to make informed financial decisions.

### A LONGSTANDING COMMITMENT TO THE COMMUNITY

Athol Credit Union is proud to be the last remaining community-based financial institution in Athol. This distinction reflects its deep roots in the region and its unwavering dedication to supporting the economic and social

well-being of the North Quabbin area.

Community involvement is integral to ACU's mission. The credit union actively participates in and supports local initiatives that strengthen community connections and promote inclusion. Recent programs, including Community Canvas and Bingo at the Athol Senior Center, highlight ACU's continued investment in community engagement and outreach.

With a presence in the community for nearly a century, Athol Credit Union has played a meaningful role in the region's growth and development, serving generations of members with consistency and care.

## **WORKPLACE CULTURE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Athol Credit Union is committed to fostering a professional and supportive workplace environment. Employees are encouraged to develop their skills and pursue growth opportunities within the financial services industry, contributing to both their personal success and the continued strength of the organization.

## **A NOTABLE PIECE OF LOCAL HISTORY**

Athol Credit Union is located in the historic Starrett Building, constructed

in 1912. This landmark building serves as a reminder of the institution's longstanding presence and enduring connection to the Athol community.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

As Athol Credit Union looks to the future, its focus remains on strengthening the community and empowering the next generation of credit union members. Through continued innovation, financial education, and community partnership, ACU aims to support sustainable growth while remaining true to its founding principles. ♦



Starrett Building, April 2025.



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