THE BERKSHIRE BLUEPRINT 2.0

—

FIVE YEAR BENCHMARK



INTRODUCTION

In February 2019, after two years of research, interviews, convenings, and discussions, the Berkshire Blueprint 2.0 was publicly launched.

This 10-year strategic economic imperative aims to provide a scaffolding through which every individual, organization, business, and industry can identify how their work, and their role, has the capacity to play an integral part in the collective prosperity of the Berkshires going forward. Through identifying the facts, challenges, successes, and opportunities we had in 2019, the Blueprint not only launched as a report, but as a living process for convening partners, building coalitions, and intimately engaging in the collaborative tracking and iterative practice needed to further the future improvement of our regional economic ecosystem. After five years of the Blueprint in action, we are at an important moment to reflect on what has happened over that time, what has emerged during those five years, and what faces us going forward if we are to reach our maximum potential as a region. Herein we aim to capture this benchmarking moment not as a means to brand this a comprehensive compendium, but as a check-in, and as an opportunity for us to each re-establish, or first establish, our awareness of how we each play a critical role in the economy of the Berkshires, and to take pause and commit to fully imbedding ourselves in ongoing and new ways to meet the charge of this moment. We are halfway through the Blueprint 2.0's expected life; let's see where we are, and navigate where to go next, together.



Advanced Manufacturing and Digital Enterprise

SUMMARY

Much like our economy as a whole has evolved, so too has the advanced manufacturing and digital enterprise cluster. As a collection of industries now encompassing physical manufacturing, advanced technologies, and digital enterprises, this cluster maintains its role as one of the largest GDP contributors to the regional economy. With over 6,500 jobs, paying in excess of $100,000 on average, the advanced manufacturing and digital enterprise cluster offers not only deep regional economic impact, but also high-growth, high-wage jobs, in industries that are resilient, far reaching, and have the potential for playing a significant role as the economy evolves to meet the needs of a digital future.

PROGRESS POINTS

- An increase in start-ups and scale-ups in the clean tech, biomedical, digital enterprise, and artificial intelligence sectors, as well as growth of businesses like Electro Magnetic Applications (EMA), acquisition of others like Berkshire Sterile, and the acquisition by local businesses like Synagex Modern IT's acquisition of Ascentek.
- The Berkshire Innovation Center (BIC) opened, providing a venue for convening and supporting an array of emergent and proven technologies and businesses.
- The BIC opened BIC Works @MASS MoCA in October 2023. This northern branch helps to build deeper connections with college students at Williams and MCLA, and furthers the integration of MASS MoCA's campus with the region's growing technology sector in the Berkshires.
- The Tech Impact Collaborative has provided online learning, ecosystem assessment, and strategy building to grow the region's technology economy, including the appointment of an Economic Recovery Corps Fellow for 2.5 years.
- The expansion of the county's aerospace industry, including EMA and United Aircraft Technologies, represent a high-growth industry taking hold in the region.
- Clean tech industries (such as SolaBlock) have begun to find the Berkshires to be an enticing home. These offer significant potential employment and economic impacts.
- Training and accelerator programs have emerged, including: BIC Manufacturing Academy, BeTA Program for High School students, and the Clean Tech Accelerator.

The Advanced Manufacturing and Digital Enterprise Cluster contributes in excess of

$1.2 billion

annually to the regional gross product annually, the highest of all six identified clusters

ADVANCED MANUFACTURING AND DIGITAL ENTERPRISE

EMERGING MOMENTUM

- Training for diverse age groups offers upskilling and reskilling to youth and incumbent workforce participants.
- Greater and better use of AI technologies and platforms to create efficiencies and help workers and businesses maximize their output.
- General Dynamics continues to establish long-term contracts (some mapped out to 2084) and partnerships creating high-paying career opportunities.
- Innovation Pathways and Career Readiness work in the middle and high school system offers increased alignment of K-12 education with jobs and industries of the future.
- Acquisitions by and of various cluster participants represent promising opportunities. Retaining jobs and businesses through active support must remain a critical focus.

FUTURE FOCUSES

- Bolstering and improving resiliency of local supply chains in the face of international tariffs, energy costs, and resource pipeline issues.
- Increased high-touch technical assistance, grant application support, and network connections for small startups, legacy businesses, and businesses seeking succession plans.
- Improve linkages to industry partners and thought leaders in urban centers like Boston, New York City, and the Capital Region of New York.
- Improve and better promote workforce training, recruitment, and retention efforts to attract resources needed to fulfill employment needs of existing and future businesses.
- Leverage rapid growth and investment in nanotech, semiconductors, and microchips in New York's Capital Region and Boston. We must maximize our position along this east-west innovation corridor with active advocacy to ensure our region benefits from this growth.
- Continue to counter deficit narratives that plague innovation efforts in the Berkshires. Innovation has never left the region. Current and future generations (locally and globally) need to be made aware of our momentum and growth/scaling potential.
- Collaborative state and federal grant applications must become a key priority, including participation from education, industry, and support agency partners.
- To ensure capacity for industry growth, we must improve and decarbonize our energy grid to help reduce energy costs and ensure a sustainable growth trajectory.
- Competitiveness for federal grants is reliant both on the reach of efforts and the local match that can be contributed, the latter of which is often an impediment locally; coalition-based approaches must be prioritized.
- Stronger support to encourage participation in the technical and manufacturing workforce from populations traditionally underrepresented, including women, BIPOC and LGBTQ communities, people in recovery, and people who have been formerly incarcerated.

Creative Economy and Culture

SUMMARY

Creativity and cultural engagement runs deep across the Berkshires, both historically and in contemporary contexts. From time-tested historic institutions, to industry disruptive catalysts for change, this cluster offers a uniquely diverse array of challenges and opportunities. With a deep bench of entrepreneurialism intrinsic to the creative economy and culture, as well as generally progressive adoption of improved practices around supporting diversity and inclusion, this cluster has not only remained a vital economic driver for the region, but also an opportunity for role modeling agility and adaptability. With approximately 5,500 jobs across the region, and a growing slate of industry partners, this cluster pushes the needle on inspiring economic growth, while fostering a quality of life in the Berkshires unlike anywhere else.

PROGRESS POINTS

- An influx of new leadership across arts and cultural organizations in the region offers new energy and opportunities.
- Collaboration across cluster participants proved vital throughout the pandemic.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work has become increasingly integrated into both organizational operations, and performance and artist selection, reaching more diverse audiences, and broadening the visitor profile.
- Increased public art countywide includes murals like those in North Adams and Pittsfield, monuments like the Susan B. Anthony (Adams) and Elizabeth Freeman (Sheffield), and public performances like Berkshire Busk (Great Barrington).
- Legacy institutions across the region have undertaken generational development and redevelopment efforts, restoring existing, and building future facilities.
- MASS MoCA undertook a one-year grant effort in partnership with the Barr Foundation to investigate opportunities that further the holistic goals of the institution and how it can facilitate deeper economic development.
- Williamstown Theater Festival's "WTF IS NEXT," a preview of a renewed format that focuses on a high-impact, program-dense period committed to fostering community and deepening connections through a broadened concept of theater.
- Studio 9 at Porches launched, offering a unique event space for world-class performance, recording, and engagement that pairs well with the region's growing festival portfolio.
- Shakespeare and Company launched an RFP to invite new mission-aligned tenancy on their expansive campus, resulting in Berkshire Film and Media Collaboratives planning for a production and educational facility on-site.
- The Pay Equity Project is underway, a coalition shining a light on the lived experiences of cultural sector workers and actions needed to further improve the ways in which cultural institutions recruit, sustain, and support their staff with the potential to inform the cultural sector on a national scale.
- Seasonal housing has become a major impediment for meeting performer and visitor needs, prompting altered approaches, planned large-scale investments, and advocacy for seasonal community designations in the Commonwealth.

CREATIVE ECONOMY AND CULTURE

EMERGING MOMENTUM

- Cultural institutions are seeking to invest broadly in regenerative technology and infrastructure.
- Hancock Shaker Village has leveraged its water resources as a revenue generator, creating improved operational sustainability.
- The Clark Art Institute has embraced its outdoor spaces as core to its mission, restoring wetlands to support migratory birds and constructing trail systems across the campus.
- Ongoing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) work remains paramount at all levels of organizations, and requires sustained investment to implement DEIB practices.
- Efforts to address the gap in seasonal and workforce housing have been advanced through advocacy. Berkshire Theater Company and Barrington Stage Company are working to address this gap in the central Berkshires, while the Clark Art Institute is pursuing property conversion to the north.
- The Pay Equity Project continues to work on building its coalition, while also looking at ways to tactically implement their initial recommendations.
- Cultural institutions are embracing and engaging other clusters more actively, such as using artificial intelligence, and the linking of arts and culture with outdoor recreation opportunities, creating new points for engagement and growth.
- Diversification of audiences has become a priority effort by many institutions.
- New entities have come to fruition, but would benefit in their early operations from being embraced and bolstered by the long-standing regional institutions.

FUTURE FOCUSES

- Collective focus on how to sustain and grow visitor traffic amidst changes in visitor habits.
- Resources for creative industry growth and facilities, like MASS MoCA's creative campus approach, will help build mission-aligned commercial tenancy and create sustainable revenue generator for campuses with space to spare.
- Transportation for workforce and seasonal visitors traveling to and from institutions needs support. Advocacy efforts should leverage 1Berkshire's 2020 Transportation Management Association study, and examine increased transportation capacity and the value loss to institutions when their workforce and visitors cannot reach them.
- Health insurance availability and affordability is an increasing challenge to cultural institutions and nonprofits in attracting and retaining employees. Pooled insurance options should be investigated.
- With Berkshire Film and Media Collaborative's project, the regional film industry deserves focus. Improved state tax incentives, access to a 24 million person drive market, and connections to major metropolitan areas have primed the Berkshires for film industry growth which could offer other organizations new conduits to earned revenue.
- Pay equity must be a key priority and maintain pace with continued increases to regional cost of living.

Food and Agriculture

SUMMARY

The vibrancy of our regional agriculture, farm-to-table dining, and increasingly diverse restaurant offerings continues to be a strength of the Berkshire economy. Driven by private investment, public support, and non-profit grit, this is a cluster that provides not only the food on our tables, but the programs that engage our youth, the land preservation that ensures local character is maintained, and the bucolic feel that is innate to "The Berkshires." While workforce challenges, climate change, and the high cost of land continue to put pressure on this cluster, innovative processes, adoption of new technologies, regenerative practices, and collaborative undertakings continue to bolster our food and agriculture cluster so that it can continue to feed us physically and economically as a region.

PROGRESS POINTS

- Since 2019, Berkshire Agricultural Ventures alone has received, distributed, and/or operationalized over $5 million in grants and loans into the regional agricultural system.
- Increased access to funding, grants, and federal support thanks to Berkshire Grown and Berkshire Ag Ventures through Market Match, revolving loan funds, and technical assistance.
- Improved practices development through working groups and industry roundtables around meat, dairy, and other value-added production opportunities.
- Renewed focus on land preservation like Indian Line Farm and infrastructure like Red Shirt Farm's retail/processing space, Woven Roots Farm's facilities, and potential regional cold and freezer storage.
- Greenagers has matured into a physical footprint since 2019 with Roots Rising also establishing its own farm in 2024, representing a significant level of growth in the organizations' potential impact.
- An 2022 earmark funded investigation into expanded cold and freezer storage capacity within the region, with the outcome of that work forthcoming in 2024.
- Collective infrastructure efforts like distribution, cooperative retail, and cold storage space, offer new options to get products to market outside of the farmers market model.
- Farmers markets' collaboration on marketing and engagement is bearing fruit, allowing markets to prosper and for more businesses to grow through consistent market access.
- Climate change has dramatically impacted agriculture, necessitating climate resilience planning, emergency funding, and farm closures due to the economic impact of climate events like flooding and drought.
- New invasive species, present challenges to field crops, soil structure, forests, and lumber production by damaging soil fertility and creating drainage issues.
- The workforce crisis and changes in immigration policy have impacted farms by reducing access to seasonal workers, decreasing farms' ability to meet market demand.
- COVID increased demand for local produce while online direct-to-consumer purchasing and increased EBT credits spurred interest in local produce for many new customers. Retaining these customers post-pandemic remains an area of focus.

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

EMERGING MOMENTUM

- Loss of farmland remains a significant problem. Efforts to prevent further degradation of farm infrastructure are underway, but new farmers need to be engaged and offered opportunities to help preserve farmland for future generations.
- Smith College has grown its vocational agriculture program which sets the stage for improved access for Berkshire County to recruit new farmers and agricultural workers.
- The growth in programs like Greenagers and Roots Rising present the opportunity for future generations of agricultural entrepreneurs and workers to grow with and within the region's food and agriculture economy.
- The reputation of "farm work" remains a perceptual barrier for many to see it as a viable career path. However, the adoption of innovative technologies, like the automated milking operation at Turner Farms, offer opportunities to leverage the attractiveness of innovation to interest Gen Z and Gen Alpha in agriculture.

FUTURE FOCUSES

- Value-added programming and production support and permitting flexibility to ensure operational viability and preserve agricultural land in a sustainable manner.
- Resiliency support and technical assistance for farms and producers at all levels, not just large scale.
- Ongoing resource support is needed for proven programs like Market Match, Roots Rising, Farmers Markets and Greenagers.
- Improving coordination of shared services around things like freezer storage, distribution, and the importation of needed supplies could cut costs and leverage regional partnerships. An example of an industry group that might benefit from this type of approach are the beverage producers.
- With intentional effort toward coordination, agritourism has an opportunity to scale in accordance with the number of farms of various types in the region.
- The cannabis is beginning to see market saturation. Specialization and business model shifts will be needed (along with activation of state social consumption policies) or businesses to adapt and prevent closures.
- Additional effort toward recruiting and educating the next generation of Berkshire farmers, including outreach to people historically underrepresented in Berkshire farming, such as the BIPOC and LGBTQ communities.

Health and Wellness

SUMMARY

As healthcare has evolved both through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, so too has the industry cluster itself. Now recognized to encompass far more than traditional medicine, also included are preventative care, fitness, alternative medicine, and supportive wellness. This cluster comprises a broad spectrum of quality-of-life amenities and direct economic drivers in our region. From hospitals to yoga studios, health and wellness entities employ over 11,000 individuals in the region. It is a sector that not only cares for and promotes self-care of our residents and visitors, but also supports the household economies of thousands of individuals and families in the Berkshires. With deep investment, new expansion, and dynamic opportunities going forward, health and wellness remains a major contributor to the positive potential our regional economy holds.

PROGRESS POINTS

- Ongoing facilities expansion and improvements, including redevelopment on the Pittsfield Campus of Berkshire Medical Center, and branch offices of CHP.
- Emergency adoption and permanent integration of telemedicine technology.
- Berkshire Health Systems reopened the North Adams Regional Hospital location 10 years after NARH ceased operations as an in-patient hospital, a major investment and asset in the northern Berkshires.
- Capacity gaps in mental health in-patient beds, supportive housing, clinicians, and support services have resulted in more individuals in need of mental health care being left without access.
- The mental health crisis has compounded the affordable housing crisis, negatively impacting the housing-insecure population in additional ways.
- Low rates of use of preventative care and personal wellness such as classes at the Y, councils on aging, and healthy food programs has further stressed urgent care and services that are being used like primary care.
- BCC relaunched its nursing program while MCLA launched academic programs in nursing, radiologic technology, and health science, helping to fill a growing gap in industry workforce development.

EMERGING MOMENTUM

- Long-term social anxiety and mental health impacts of the pandemic are yet to be fully understood and will continue to manifest over time, requiring adaptive solutions.
- Urgent care facilities and emergency rooms struggle to handle the flow of patients; added education and proactive outreach is needed to improve use of preventative medicine and personal wellness programs.
- The health and wellness systems need to continue working to fill gaps in workforce capacity and build durability in the generalist and specialist systems for the whole region.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

FUTURE FOCUSES

- Specific workforce housing is needed for permanent and traveling medical staff across the entire region.
- Investment in programs through existing resources like the Y, Dalton Community Recreation Association, and Berkshire South Regional Community Center could offer renewed use of wellness programs like swim, yoga, meditation, and more, but investment is needed in marketing these resources and providing transportation to maximize use and access.
- Primary care providers, dentists, and other specialists lack capacity to meet current and future populations, suggesting additional recruitment and retention efforts within the ecosystem.
- Mental health providers and resources need increased visibility through marketing and engagement, as well as capacity-building support.
- Additional quality elder care and age-in-place facilities are needed to support aging population in oversized housing.
- Work to pair pay equity, financial literacy, and community health metrics could offer a unique approach to put a dollar value on one's wellness, potentially helping to incentivize better self-care.

Hospitality and Tourism

SUMMARY

With millions of visitors coming to the Berkshires annually, it is no wonder that our hospitality and tourism cluster maintains its role as a key economic cluster in the Berkshires. With a monumental rebound from the most challenging points of the COVID-19 pandemic, this cluster has proven itself resilient and vibrant, even during some of our most challenging points. As the demographic of visitors is getting younger and more diverse, the Berkshire hospitality and tourism cluster continues to drive over $900M in annual economic impact regionally while offering the opportunity for potential new residents to discover the region. It is a cluster that invites new and returning visitors, celebrates the amazing history and new investments taking shape, and acts as a center of gravity, drawing significantly from the 24 million people within 200 miles of our corner of the world.

PROGRESS POINTS

- New facilities have come online, while a significant number of hospitality properties have changed hands and seen a breadth of reinvestment occur, such as Hotel Downstreet or Miraval.
- Visitor habits continue to evolve, with visitors trending younger and more demographically diverse.
- The seasonal flow of hospitality has changed. Shoulder seasons have become increasingly programmed, engaging return visitors in new ways and attracting new visitors at times when tourism historically ebbed.

PROGRESS POINTS (CONT.)

- Climate change has directly impacted tourism. With less snow in the winter, shorter foliage seasons, and unpredictable temperature fluctuations, consistency of traditional weather patterns is less reliable. This necessitates adaptability, agility, and new thinking around resiliency planning.
- Rising demand and hospitality workforce crunch has produced significant impacts, resulting in fewer places to dine and shop, and less reliable hours at local visitor attractions.
- Tourism has rebounded well since the pandemic, with banner year-over-year visitorship and revenue generation for the region.
- The "Berkshire" brand has increased in visibility, including the launch of a new regional tourism site, BerkshiresOutside.org.

EMERGING MOMENTUM

- The Berkshire Flyer, in its third year, has proven that visitorship from New York can be augmented through improved seasonal rail; this program needs a permanent funding model to ensure long-term viability and consider potential year-round operations.
- We have used resources wisely and maximized public funding received by the region, but additional public and private investment is critical to reach outside markets and continue to recruit and retain visitors.
- Black tourism has begun to be a discussion among regional tourism and hospitality partners. To fully embrace the concept, strategic investment is needed to help grow programming, build a brand, and market opportunities locally and regionally.
- Additional hospitality properties are under development across the region, with the potential to add hundreds of new keys to the existing stock.
- While short-term rentals peaked during the pandemic, an obvious shift back towards more traditional hospitality has begun, allowing for new investment into accommodations to move forward.
- Unique hospitality opportunities such as "glamping" resorts and chemical-free facilities present additional opportunities.

FUTURE FOCUSES

- A shift and broadening of the Berkshire tourism narrative is necessary. More than a rural gilded age summer escape, we are an outdoor recreation center, farm-to-table hub, and arts and culture mecca that offers a diverse range of opportunities year-round.
- Ecotourism and agritourism have significant capacity for growth, connecting elements of our agriculture and outdoor recreation clusters. This offers not only a new layer of tourism, but also a new potential revenue stream that crosses multiple clusters.
- Tourism startups, such as Berkshire Camino, are in need of additional support to meet their full potential. Connecting these startups to successful hospitality ventures offers an opportunity for early-stage businesses to build their market share and improve the likelihood of success.
- Festivals, already a key piece of our tourism economy, have potential to be an even bigger driver. New events (like Berkshire Busk) and collaborations (like the Williamstown Theater Festival and MASS MoCA) offer opportunities to build momentum and reach.
- Specialized offerings and programs for diverse communities and affinity groups present a chance to reach underserved populations that may find the Berkshires to desired a destination; collaborative marketing to these populations will be paramount to success.

Outdoor Recreation

SUMMARY

As the most recently identified primary economic cluster in the Berkshires, formally recognized in 2021, the Outdoor Recreation cluster is a quickly growing and evolving regional driver. The backbone of the cluster is amenities that have existed for generations, and regional strategic efforts. However, an influx of over $100 million in recent investment and facility upgrades, as well as extended regional awareness of the outdoor recreation resources of the Berkshires, have propelled the cluster from "local benefit" to "economic catalyst" in the past five years. With a huge variety and scale of recreational spaces, new facilities to enjoy, dynamic programming, and a maturing outdoor recreation culture, this cluster is offering new job opportunities, skill development, and direct and indirect economic impact that will only continue to grow and evolve.

PROGRESS POINTS

- Following the foundation-setting by Berkshire Regional Planning's Outdoor Recreation Plan, BerkshiresOutside.org launched in 2024 as a centralized platform for outdoor recreation access, promotion, and navigation.
- Deep investment in public and private facilities and expansions including Naumkeag, the Bousquet properties, Ashuwillticook Rail Trail, Greylock Glen, Pleasant Valley, and more.
- Increased accessibility to trails through specialized infrastructure and accessible trail development by agencies and entities like Berkshire Natural Resources Council.
- The "Berkshires Brand" has grown its focus on outdoor recreation as a key draw to live, work, and play here, making outdoor recreation a significant recruitment and retention asset.
- The Commonwealth created the Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation, offering a pipeline of support and resources for future program and infrastructure development.
- Significant year-round investments in legacy recreation amenities like Jiminy Peak, Catamount, the Trustees of Reservations, and others are preparing them to remain resilient in the face of climate change influences.
- New businesses like DEI Outdoors have helped to make outdoor recreation opportunities more approachable and welcoming for diverse populations.

EMERGING MOMENTUM

- Increased intentional linkage between outdoor recreation facilities and amenities with commercial districts, retail, and other revenue-generating entities.
- Large public infrastructure projects in consideration and development like Hoosic River Revival, Bel Air Dam, and Lake Mansfield need to prioritize recreation throughout project design and must include economic impact analysis. Recreation will be critical to paying for these projects over time.
- Further expansions of the Ashuwillticook Rail Trail into the heart of Pittsfield and beyond aim to create a central and accessible recreation artery through much of the county.
- With increases in temperature and unpredictable weather due to climate change, damaging weather events and seasonal disruptions require outdoor recreation-based businesses to further the development of resiliency plans and efforts to sustain operations.
- This remains a "frontier opportunity" where strategic investments can help new opportunities incubate and existing opportunities accelerate and scale.

FUTURE FOCUSES

- With increased use of outdoor recreation assets, improved signage, parking, and sanitary facilities are needed both in year-round and seasonal instances.
- Increased maintenance efforts are needed to mitigate the impact of significant increases in use, which is causing erosion, compaction, and unintentional harm to these resources.
- There is a critical need to foster leadership development and a workforce pipeline that will help lead and grow existing and emergent organizations in this cluster.
- The impacts of the Rest of River Cleanup on outdoor recreation, should be an included factor in the decision making and processes implemented.
- An increase in focus on family-oriented activities will help grow the cluster's engagement and to provide additional draw for families to live and work within the region.
- Improved staff retention and support for full-time, year-round employment is needed to help attract the high-quality talent needed to foster sustainable economic impact.

Over

6,000

full-time and seasonal jobs are supported through this cluster across the Berkshires

Economic Ecosystem

TALENT

- BCC, MCLA, Early College Programs in K-12 systems, early intervention, and stackable credential programs remain vital to creating a locally grown workforce.
- Re-skilling and up-skilling efforts remain vital to supporting existing and emerging markets and specialized technical expertise needs.
- MassHire, Berkshire Interns, and other emerging programs like the Economic Recovery Corps offer new high-impact, exciting opportunities for youth from high school through college to develop as meaningful contributors and participants in the local economy.
- At the time of this report, Berkshire County is functionally at "full employment" (with an unemployment rate below 4% since April 2023), representing a continuing talent and workforce gap requiring constant investment and attention.
- English Language Learner programs at BCC are consistently experiencing waitlists, representing a challenge in helping our immigrant community become the highly successful regional talent pool they aspire to be.
- Municipalities face capacity limits, a loss of knowledge through retirements, and a limited amount of new talent choosing civil service, resulting in operational gaps, missed opportunities, and delays in short- and long-term projects.
- Educational systems have seen significant socialization loss amongst students in recent years, but have added a variety of soft skills like financial literacy to foster lifelong skills.
- Changes in the expectations by each of the current working generations causes levels of dissension in workplace policy and practice, creating challenges in workforce cultural dynamics.

Over

$6,000,000

has been operationalized by regional agencies to support workforce skill development, career readiness, and talent pipelines to meet the needs of our ecosystem

BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

- The Berkshires continue to see a strong entrepreneurship, driving the founding of new businesses of varying sizes across industries. The ecosystem of support resources available and maturing supports this renewed entrepreneurial spirit.
- Deeper collaborations between businesses have continued to be imperative to entrepreneurial and business support, maximizing their reach, becoming more inclusive, and broadening offerings.
- The termination of many pandemic-era federal funding programs, leading to the ending of a number of technical assistance and support programs that relied on those funds, may result in gaps in the entrepreneurial support system.
- Berkshire Black Economic Council, EforAll, Small Business Resource Expos, Blackshires, BIC Works, and similar programs are resources that need ongoing regional support and improved referral networks to meet their potential.
- Sustained capital infusion is needed to complement EDA, USDA, and other public funding to support small and emerging businesses. This needs to come from local sources, as well as the state; finding local "match" for federal grants remains a major impediment to the Berkshires accessing our fair share of available resources.
- Technical assistance has been developed and proven successful, such as the Berkshire Economic Recovery Project, Berkshire Funding Focus, and multiple Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation funded offerings. Demand outpaces capacity now however due to decreased funding of those technical assistance resources developed during the pandemic.
- "Campuses" like the emerging Pittsfield Innovation District and the MASS MoCA creative campus vision offer new centers of gravity to invite, incubate, and scale a diverse array of industries that will fuel local and regional economies, attract a future workforce, and inspire investment and engagement.
- Grassroots efforts like Roots & Dreams and Mustard Seeds have developed solid footings to begin building employee ownership opportunities and business support for some of our most underserved communities.
- Berkshire Funding Focus, now in its second year, is a critical support in driving coalitions for resource access at the municipal, organizational, and business levels, helping to access key resource pools for the region.

Since 2019, over 600 entrepreneurs and small businesses have accessed technical assistance and support from the array of regional agency partners, to help start, grow, and sustain their operations

Cross-Cutting Issues

Along with the industry-specific activity and needs and the broader business ecosystem growth, there remains a set of issues that cross each economic cluster in some way which more broadly impact the communities and individuals that live, work, and play in the Berkshires. These issues have seen activity in the past five years, but remain mission-critical for us to collectively maintain momentum and action to improve upon them.

BROADBAND

- Broadband access is increasingly important given the rise of remote work, both for the local workforce and potential relocators. With new opportunities for students to attend online schools, access to quality broadband is an educational equity issue.
- Strategic planning by several municipalities, paired with private industry outreach, has fostered potential new providers entering the local market and expanding to-the-door broadband infrastructure and access by leveraging generational investments from the federal and state government.
- The Berkshire Tech Impact Collaborative continues to advance the vision and move the needle on elements that will grow our rural tech industry and digital enterprise focus, with the goal of 10-gig broadband being a target to meet potential industry demands.

KEY NEEDS

- Increased private and delegation advocacy, along with equitable investment by the state and federal government, to build access through new infrastructure.
- Clear pathways and educational efforts to reach the underserved so they can benefit from existing and emergent resources and opportunities for broadband access and the value that brings to them.
- Digital equity investment (driven by ongoing strategy-building by partners like Berkshire Regional Planning) is needed to help fill the persistent gap in to-the-door access, (exacerbated by a state-level overestimation of access).

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is administering $147 million in federal broadband infrastructure support beginning in 2024, a paramount opportunity to leverage large investments to improve regional high speed internet access

The non-White population of the Berkshires

increased by over 42%

between 2015 and 2022, suggesting a significant increase in regional diversity, and a need for improved inclusive practices

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION & BELONGING

- Through a number of efforts by regional agency partners, industry leaders, and others, DEIB and DEIA education and informed practices have begun gaining adoption and implementation in the region (e.g. the Blackshires Leadership Accelerator and Impact Initiative, Multicultural Bridge programs, North Adams IDEA Commission, Pittsfield's hiring a chief diversity officer, and the growth of the Berkshire Race Task Force).
- DEIB/DEIA-informed program design, execution, assessment, and adaptation continues to foster improved access to resources, new audience reach, and opportunities for historically underserved and under-engaged populations.
- Since 2019, the Berkshire Black Economic Council, Blackshires Community Empowerment Foundation, and Latinas413 have all been established while state-level agencies like the LGBT Chamber of Massachusetts have expanded their reach into the region, establishing Western Massachusetts offices and building partnerships with local agencies.
- The Berkshire Immigrant Center currently faces a 1500:1 ratio of immigrants to client-facing staff, representing a significant challenge in supporting the growing immigrant population.

KEY NEEDS

- Broadened reach, education, and integration of improved practices across all industries, especially by the organizations not expressly founded around these ideals.
- Increased investment into specialized resources to reach underserved community members, including translation, outreach, engagement, trust building, and "wraparound" supports like childcare and stipends.
- A focus on wealth generation through ownership, whereby BIPOC communities and underserved populations build equity in the regional growth that is occurring (particularly in hospitality and tourism, the creative economy, and high-growth/high-potential industries).
- Management training around DEI remains in need of additional and ongoing focus to ensure that employers are being inclusive and supportive of diverse candidates and employees.
- Ongoing and increased investment into immigrant-supportive programs (both personal and professional) are needed to connect immigrants with the opportunities within the region (e.g. community building, housing, jobs, entrepreneurship).

ENERGY

- Berkshire County energy costs remain some of the highest in the nation and are primarily reliant on fossil fuels and aging infrastructure with limited new investment compared to the rest of the Commonwealth.
- Alternative energy is becoming prominent, but requires capital infusion to fulfill current and future energy needs, support access improvements, and foster cost reductions.
- Individual entities with capacity, such as Williams College, have worked independently to decrease their carbon footprint and decarbonize their energy use. However, most of the region lacks the resources needed to do this independently, so increased access to federal and state resources to collectively decarbonize is needed to counter the impacts of climate change and improve energy systems resilience.

KEY NEEDS

- More comprehensive, localized data must be captured to tell the real narrative of energy in the region as a means to make the case for improvements and investments that will make energy affordable regionally.
- We must fully leverage extant distribution infrastructure, such as retrofitting the "peaker" plant in Pittsfield for alternative energy production alongside investment in new distribution, storage, and capacity to meet existing and future demand.
- Support from the Commonwealth and federal government must be advocated for, and accessed, to better incentivize energy production and storage, both at scale and locally, to decarbonize the grid.
- Energy equity must be considered when state investments are being made to ensure decreased costs and impacts on businesses seeking to start and grow in the region.
- Infrastructure resilience and durability must remain a key focus, including disaster readiness planning, redundant systems, and infrastructure updates that decrease fossil fuel dependence, and ensure we meet demand changes going forward.

Average residential energy rates in Berkshire County are

84% higher than the national average and 42% higher than the average of Massachusetts

POPULATION & WORKFORCE

- The region needs to cultivate an influx of new skilled workers to support the economy and meet the evolving needs of the business community.
- Census data suggests the population is getting younger and more diverse, and that previous population decline of the previous 30+ years continues to slow.
- The pandemic further exacerbated the rates of retirement, with more individuals taking retirement early or immediately upon eligibility, many employers are suffering from both workforce and institutional knowledge loss.
- "Ghosting" and pre-90-day turnover is a consistent issue, resulting in failed searches and failed starts, costing employers significant resources.
- MassHire has received over $5 million to support workforce efforts, launched 11 Career Pathways programs, provided 1600+ high school internships, and revised the MassHire Blueprint in 2023 to include education/childcare as a critical sector.
- "Job hopping" has been a growing issue, significantly driven by low rates of unemployment, rapid increases in salaries during the pandemic, and a "job seekers" market.
- Hybrid models have changed the face of work, with many employers shifting to remote and hybrid models permanently as a result of the pandemic. This has impacted commercial real estate and forced changes in workforce management and oversight.
- With trades retirements happening en masse and significant training/education required to replace workers in these fields, major services at all scales (electricians, construction, plumbers, mechanics, and more) are becoming increasingly difficult to source.
- Minimum wage struggles to support the cost of living in many communities in the region, making talent recruitment and retention difficult.

KEY NEEDS

- New efforts to continue to recruit and retain transplants and workforce in the area to sustain growth and maintain population numbers.
- Create, grow, and support structures that provide pathways for BIPOC community members to move to and stay in the region and become a visible, and supported, part of the regional fabric.
- Childcare remains a major restrictive element for recruitment and retention; investment in growing capacity is needed across all of our 32 cities and towns.
- Collective investment into fostering "stickiness" is needed to help the Berkshires retain residents, even if they work remotely.
- Increased marketing and branding of available workforce supportive programs is needed to maximize the reach and get the opportunities into the hands of those who can benefit most from them.
- Appreciation and strategic adoption of AI as a tool to improve employees efficiency, thus changing jobs, not eliminating them.
- While trades skills are seeing renewed investment (for example McCann's HVAC training facility) gaps persist. Furthermore, with an ongoing shift of narrative of technical schools becoming more "college readiness" programs, graduates are not necessarily immediately joining the local workforce, instead leaving for further degrees which delays filling gaps in the trades.

TRANSPORTATION

- West-East and Northern Tier Passenger Rail efforts remain in the study and design phases representing a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild our rail access for the region.
- The Berkshire Flyer pilot continues into its third full summer season of operation in 2024 with improved rail crossings and conceived added service capacity in the short-term.
- Work facilitated by 1Berkshire in 2020 to research the concept of a transportation management association resulted in the conclusion that a localized system would be powerful, but financial resources remain a critical limitation.
- Microtransit and adapted routes like the TriTown Connector have been tested, but longer duration funding to establish meaningful data is needed to identify how existing gaps can be overcome to support regular and seasonal transportation demand.
- A broader array of stakeholders and partners have become involved in regional transportation needs and solutions, offering a more comprehensive approach and stronger advocacy.
- Facility and technology upgrades at regional airports in Pittsfield and North Adams have improved opportunities for commercial and public amenities, capacity for larger aircraft, and future growth potential of air travel into the region.

KEY NEEDS

- Collaborative and persistent advocacy is needed to ensure inclusion of the region in the generational investments coming into the Commonwealth.
- In-region transportation models need significant support and work to meet existing opportunities and potential growth and needs.
- A collaborative extra-governmental coalition that bridges government, BRTA, rail, microtransit, and private sector transportation options could finally bring to bear a comprehensive regional and first-last mile network to improve access and mobility, decreasing car-miles driven and improving workforce reliability.
- We need a more efficient, easy to navigate transit system that uses a set of sub-regional bus stops as local transit hubs, linking buses, rental cars, on-demand shuttles, and shared ride offerings.
- Investments in roads, bike paths, sidewalks, drainage, and bridges are desperately needed across the region. This includes major projects like the Adventure-Trail/Ashuwillticook Rail Trail and the North Adams Overpass, the multitude of deficient bridges regionally, deferred maintenance issues of existing roadways, and improving pedestrian-friendly and bike infrastructure (particularly in downtowns) to make communities more walkable, bikeable, and resilient.

Current studies and plans

across the region include the potential of 3 different rail projects into the region, multiple airport infrastructure projects, significant road and bridge infrastructure, and a bike path project that could become one of the longest contiguous multi-use paths in the entire Commonwealth

HOUSING

- Housing has become a full-blown crisis in the Berkshires. Available units across the housing spectrum are significantly outweighed by demand.
- Homelessness and housing insecurity continue to be on the rise, exacerbated by the national mental health crisis. This crisis has challenged the capacity of service agencies and impacted communities in a multitude of ways.
- Pandemic migration has resulted in housing value spikes, gaps in market-rate housing has put downward pressure on affordable housing, and state policy continues to lack in incentives for the diverse array of housing types we need in the region.
- A Housing Vision for the Berkshires launched in 2022, outlines 62 strategic actions that will directly impact the housing landscape of the region and calling for collective investment and action.
- Housing development and redevelopment projects are underway, such as the Eagle Mill (Lee), Wright Building (Pittsfield), and the Notre Dame Church (North Adams) alongside recently-completed projects like Windrush Commons and the Windflower Inn in Great Barrington. Additional projects of great potential are stalled and need investment, and potentially change of ownership to move forward effectively.
- With many historic housing properties conversion to professional offices, and many seniors living in oversized houses they lack capacity to maintain, our regional housing stock continues to be constrained, while perceptions around populations decline vs building stock create confusion.

KEY NEEDS

- The recommendations of A Housing Vision for the Berkshires must be adopted and advocated for to make the impact it intends. It will require grassroots efforts, private sector investment, local municipal policy change, and state and federal incentives to meet the true needs of our region.
- Housing and economic development need to be advocated for and recognized as inextricably linked from one another. This needs to play into how investments are strategized, advocacy is positioned, and execution is achieved.
- Novel approaches and specialized housing need to be further advanced, including affinity housing for specific industries like artists and healthcare, and demographic-focused housing like age-in-place developments.
- Access to affordable housing needs to be improved, including updating affordable housing stock and increasing available market-rate housing to relieve the downward pressure on existing affordable units that are currently inaccessible to many of those in need.
- The regional business community must coalesce around support for housing developments in the region, particularly in the face of determined local “not in my back yard” opposition.
- Age-in-place housing is needed for over-housed seniors to move into, allowing many larger single and multi-family homes to be renovated and put back into use at full capacity.

WHERE WE STARTED

READ THE OG BERKSHIRE BLUEPRINT 2.0

The Berkshire Blueprint 2.0 is comprehensive, 1Berkshire-facilitated, community-driven strategic imperative that offers the regional economy a roadmap to economic growth and prosperity. By laying the renewed groundwork for sustained action and activity, 1Berkshire will work with and support partners from across the region to enact effective and measurable steps to continue to advance the Berkshires' positive trajectory.

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

STAY IN TOUCH

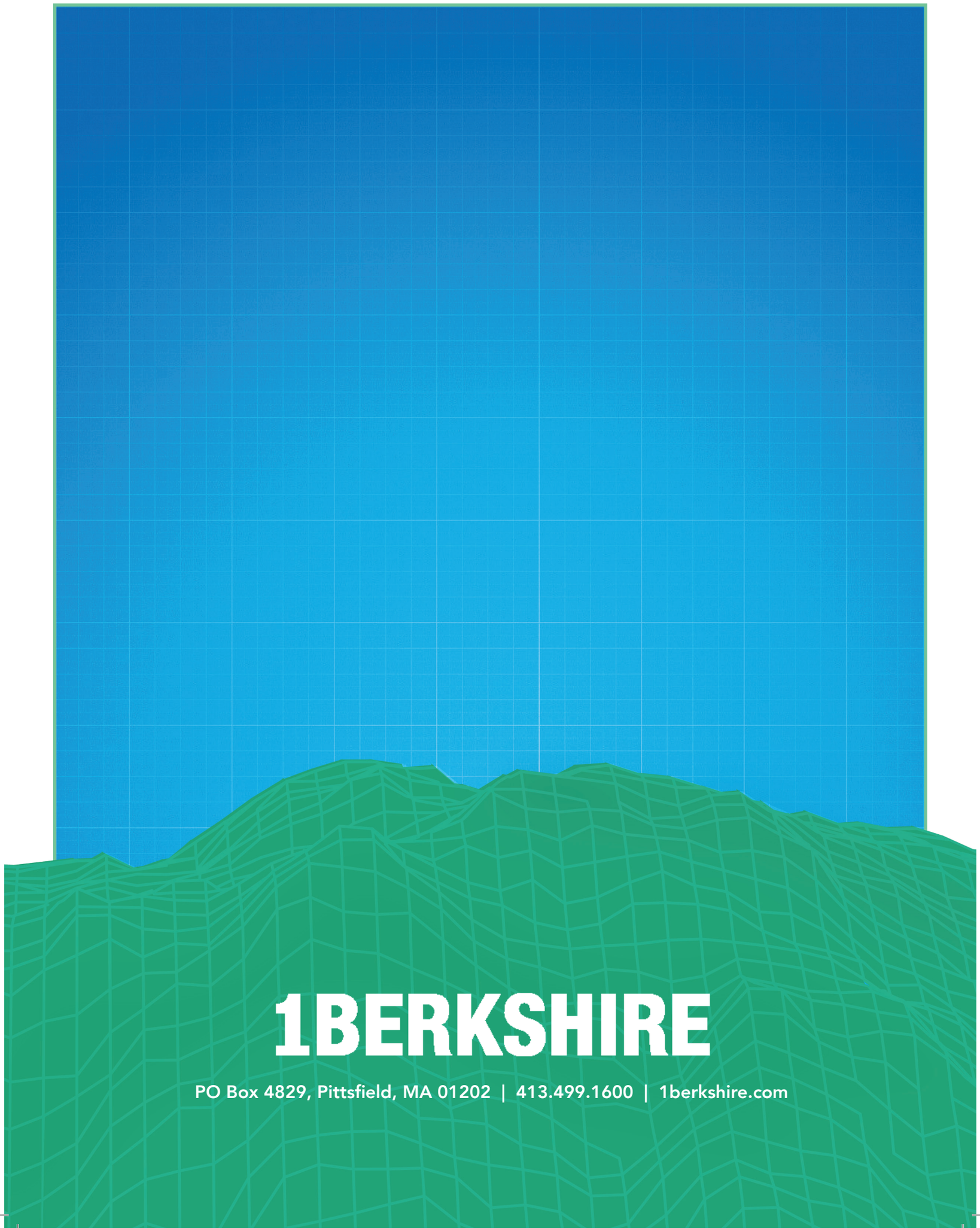
This effort is only as meaningful as the work we do together. Be a part of the Blueprint, and be sure we know everything you are working on. Follow the QR code to fill out the form.

FINAL CHARGE

The Berkshire economy remains unique, innovative, agile, and collaborative. With a collective vision, coalition-based approach, and consistent support, we can continue on a positive trajectory.

Such a trajectory appreciates and celebrates our successes, recognizes and assesses our areas of challenge, and aspires, strategizes, and executes on our opportunities to thrive. There are no islands in the Berkshires. As a region, we are able to persist and progress thanks to the deep roots, strong ties, and mutual support that we offer amongst and across our various communities, organizations, industries, and functional areas. It is only with an authentic recommitment to our collective future that we can meet our full potential. This is a moment to once again identify the piece of the regional blueprint that we can individually take on, to connect with those who share our dreams and aspirations, and to invest fully in continuing to make the Berkshires better for all who wish to make this place where they live, work, play and thrive. It's our shared success to claim, it's our collective economy to build upon, and it's our region's future to embrace.





1BERKSHIRE

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