

Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

Attendees

Working Group Members:

Note: the list below shows all invitees and which were able to attend the meeting.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Albert LaValley | Worcester Planning Board |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Alyssa Corazzini | Advisory Committee Member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Amanda Gregoire | Mass Development; Advisory Committee Member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Amie Shei | The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts; Advisory Committee Member |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Casey Burns | Healthy Greater Worcester |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Casey Starr | Main South Community Development Corp.; Advisory Committee Member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | David Sullivan | Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Elizabeth Cruz | Latin American Business Organization (LABO) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Evelyn Darling | Downtown Worcester Business Improvement District |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Jon Weaver | Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Joyce Mandell | Worcester Urban Planning Partnership; Advisory Committee Member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Kathy Rentsch | Quinsigamond Community College |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Kerrie Salwa | Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Lynn Cheney | Business owner, Maker on Main; Advisory Committee Member |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Mari Gonzalez | El Buen Samaritano Food Pantry |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Mark Borenstein | Land Use Attorney at Bowditch & Dewey, LLP; Advisory Committee Member |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Miguelina Peralta-Bobrick | EforAll Greater Worcester |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Paul Matthews | Worcester Regional Research Bureau |



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Rob Morris | Worcester Regional Food Hub |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Roberta Brien | Worcester Business Development Corp (WBDC); Advisory Committee Member |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Sean Harris | Quinsigamond Community College |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sujatha Krishnan | Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC); Advisory Committee Member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Tim Garvin | United Way of Central Mass, Worcester Together |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Ulysses Youngblood | Business Owner, Major Bloom; Advisory Committee Member |

Public Participants:

Note: the list below shows all registrants and which attended the meeting.

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|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Shaun Bartone | <input type="checkbox"/> | Tova Reiter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Chris Bates | <input type="checkbox"/> | Errica Saunders |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Louise Burrell | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Craig Thomas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Julia Clark | <input type="checkbox"/> | Brandy Thomas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Miranda Cruz | <input type="checkbox"/> | Jeanette Tozer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Samantha DeLuca | <input type="checkbox"/> | Travis Tran |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Yenni Desroches | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Rachel Utzig |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Pam Farren | <input type="checkbox"/> | Solange Vidal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Feanna Jattan-Singh | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Joel Wallen |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Sonia Jimenez | <input type="checkbox"/> | Jess Yáñez |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Joseph Johnson | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Conor McCormack | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Alex Pichalski | | |



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

City Staff (Worcester Planning & Regulatory Services Division):

- Stephen Rolle *Commissioner of the Department of Transportation and Mobility*
- Michelle Smith *Chief Planner*

Consultant Team:

- Tim Love (Utile) *Principal-in-Charge*
- Zoë Mueller (Utile) *Project Manager & Urban Planner*
- Kyle Vangel (HR&A) *Principal*
- Guillermo Creamer, Jr. (Utile) *Community Organizer*
- Zada Smith (HR&A) *Research Analyst*
- Rahi Patel (Utile) *Urban Planner*



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

Agenda

1. **Introductions**
2. **Project Focus**
 - a. About the Plan
 - b. Project Timeline
 - c. Existing Conditions Overview
3. **Issues and Opportunities Discussion**
 - a. Public Comment Period #1
4. **Growth Framework Feedback**
 - a. Public Comment Period #2
5. **Next Steps & How to Get Involved**

Meeting Notes

I. Introductions

Zoë Mueller, Steven Rolle, and Michelle Smith introduced themselves and the larger project team and thanked the Working Group members for participating. Zoë then provided a description of the Economic Opportunity Working Group's role within the larger Worcester Now | Next planning process.

After City and consultant team introductions, Working Group members introduced themselves and their affiliations.

II. Project Focus

Zoë introduced the Working Group members to the project, including guiding principles, past plans, core topic areas, a project timeline, and review of public engagement efforts made to date.

Some of the top economic opportunity related themes heard in public engagement so far included:

- Enabling and supporting neighborhood-scale commerce;
- Investing in job training, workforce development and worker quality of life; and
- Investing in complete streets and public transit to support businesses.

IV. Issues & Opportunities Discussion

Kyle Vangel summarized the top issues and patterns of note based on analysis so far, along with corresponding prompts for discussion which included:

- **Worcester is following an “eds and meds” trajectory with high growth potential:** how can Worcester leverage its potential to benefit from the thriving regional “meds & eds” economy?



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

- **Worcester's job market is reinforcing income inequality, BIPOC earning disparities:** how can Worcester reduce income inequality and expand access to family-wage jobs, especially for BIPOC residents?
- **Entrepreneurship can contribute to wealth building and community quality of life:** how can Worcester cultivate a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports community wealth building and quality of life along neighborhood commercial corridors?
- Based on your experience in Worcester, what else would you add to this list of issues and patterns?

Employment growth in Worcester since 2010 has lagged compared to other Massachusetts cities and Worcester's economy is concentrated in the health care and education sectors. BIPOC workers are underrepresented in the highest paying industries of Worcester County, a trend which has contributed to income and wealth disparities between White and non-White Worcesterites.

A. Comments from Working Group Members:

- **Ulysses Youngblood:** Thinking about opportunities for the future, do we know where college students are coming from? What do their demographics look like?
 - **Planning Team Response:** That's a great point. We haven't seen any specific data. Paul, has the research bureau explored this at all?
 - **Paul Matthews:** HECCMA (Higher Education Consortium of Central MA) would be a good place to check.
- **Elizabeth Cruz:** Do we have data on how often college graduates are staying in Worcester and which industries they are most likely to join?
 - **Planning Team Response:** We should certainly search for this information from the source Paul mentioned. LinkedIn could also be a good source for answering these kinds of questions.
 - **Elizabeth Cruz:** That would help add context to the employment gap situation in Worcester.
 - **Sean Harris:** Worcester has become more palatable to college students lately, so it seems like more college students are staying than in the past. College enrollment across the board is actually down, though. And even within high paying industries, most of the workers are making low wages because they're not management. Manufacturing wages might be higher than other industries, but they're not that high unless you move up within the organization. We have to look at larger employers and ask what they're doing to increase retention and equitable advancement. Unfortunately, in most of these companies, management doesn't look like the people they're trying to keep. I don't see anyone here that's 20 or 21 years old who will be affected by this plan here. We need to keep a focus on youth engagement as a key part of long term economic development.
 - **Guillermo Creamer, Jr.:** I've spent a lot of time engaging with the university community in Worcester. We see nearly 25,000 students come



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

to Worcester every year. One challenge for the colleges is encouraging students to become involved in the city. But how do we get Worcester to be a place they interact with on a daily basis? How do we encourage students to go to dinner downtown and to take WRTA or walk downtown instead of taking Uber? Our students are great but right now they mainly stick to their campuses. How do we get young people to think about Worcester as a place they want to live once they graduate?

- **Zoë Mueller:** One of the elements of our engagement work is to have focus groups with sections of the community we're not seeing in other engagement forums.
- **Paul Matthews:** Many schools have vocational education programs locally.
- **Miguelina Peralta-Bobrick:** Big employers are at the top of my mind. Do we have data on the biggest employers in the region? What are their needs and challenges? How can we get them to hire a more diverse workforce?
- **Mari Gonzalez:** A lot of people left their jobs in the pandemic- many that they've been in for decades. What are these bigger employers asking for? Worcester also has a high number of undocumented families who face additional barriers to finding employment and housing. There is a strong entrepreneurial culture throughout Worcester, and we've seen a lot of new businesses start in the past few years.
- **Kyle Vangel:** Are there any ideas on increasing diversity in high paying positions?
 - **Elizabeth Cruz:** Unum offered a program for employees to teach employees how to code. Big companies should have internal training programs for employees with the help of the city.
- **Mari Gonzalez:** We need more programs that connect local businesses to schools. Students can explore their interests and make connections while they're in school.
- **Sean Harris:** I met with a woman who is taking a social media marketing course and using it to grow her business. Older people tend to think that entrepreneurship is a fad, but businesses that don't adjust and pay their workers to compete with that are not staying afloat.
- **Lynn Cheney:** One of the common themes here is access. I'm not sure what organization could handle being a pipeline to direct people to the right places. Maybe the Chamber of Commerce. They have connections to local businesses and schools. There needs to be an umbrella that can direct people to the resources they need.
 - **Kyle Vangel:** Absolutely. There needs to be a clear path to implementation that includes the participation of the city, businesses, schools, and local organizations.
- **Elizabeth Cruz:** Capital is a barrier to entrepreneurship. Education on running a business and adequate funding to get that business off the ground are critical. There are a lot of Latino entrepreneurs who can run a business but don't have



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

the necessary capital.

B. Public Comments

- **Rachel Utzig:** I recently volunteered with the Worcester Green Corps and I learned how they are providing youth with opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have access to. It's also important to see Worcester give opportunities to prevent and solve homelessness. Homelessness is increasing in Worcester and finding training to take on another job would be a crucial safety net.

V. Growth Framework Feedback

Kyle introduced the Place Types Map, which is an interpretation of current development patterns in Worcester.

A. Comments from Working Group Members:

- **Mari Gonzalez:** Mill Street has an old supermarket. We need more spaces for entertainment for our children in this city. I often have to take my kids out of town. We're losing the fun and vibrancy that we need for our kids.
- **Roberta Brien:** Unfortunately, in retail or entertainment the owner is primarily going to look at density and median income. If those levels are not at a certain threshold, they assume that there won't be a viable market for their business. A lot of people go to Apex Center from Worcester (outside of Worcester) and sadly Worcester still hasn't gotten up to that density and income level. Restaurants are quite beloved here so they're on an upward trend, but within certain industries (like entertainment) we need to do more to bring those businesses here. Many businesses that closed during the pandemic were family-run. Many businesses require subsidy to fund operations, not just capital expenses.
 - **Kyle Vangel:** I recently heard, for instance, that Worcester is the largest city in the country without a movie theater.
 - **Lynn Cheney:** I've worked with the Worcester Businesses Development Corp. Before, I did not know that the WBDC and the City had been trying to source a grocery store downtown for years. If there's not a robust support system, we're not going to get the kinds of entrepreneurship we really need to see in Worcester.
- **Paul Matthews:** It's hard to find appropriate development for older urban building stock. It requires a lot of commitment from financing, marketing, development, etc.

B. Public Comments

- **Rachel Utzig:** I live off Highland St. Half is zoned commercial and half is zoned residential. If we could complete the triangle that's being made from Park and Highland to Main St., that would be great. Since there's so much through traffic, the businesses at the end of the street don't see as much traffic as they could. Connecting students to the Greendale area would also be a good idea. I also think we have an opportunity to connect communities separated by the



Economic Opportunity Working Group #1 Notes | 8/17/2022

highway. Grafton St. should have more density. The WRTA route on Park Ave. doesn't run on weekends so it's hard to shop. More density on Park Ave. overall would be great.

IV. Next Steps & How to Get Involved

The final two slides provided an overview of the next steps in the process for Working Group Members and for the planning process overall. Working Group members were encouraged to stay involved and support the Planning Team in reaching more members of the Worcester community.

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