



## **MassEcon Western MA Regional Spotlight Summary**

**September 24, 2020**

- Western Massachusetts has a number of advantages as a place to do business.
- It sits geographically in the center of New England/New York, with excellent north-south (I-91) and east-west (I-90) infrastructure. While perceptions may be that the region is remote, it takes less time to reach the region from the greater Boston area than some typical commutes from the suburbs into Boston.
- The Pioneer Valley especially is able to draw on a significant population for workforce, pulling not only from the three-county region, but also from Connecticut, the Berkshires and central Massachusetts.
- Collaboration is a hallmark in the region. Collaboration, among communities, regional organizations, and employers is a key differentiator for the region.
- There is a very strong sense of place in the region. People want to be there and when investments are made in facilities or people, it is a commitment to the region as a whole.
- It has incredible cultural assets, especially in the Berkshires, and key tourist destinations in the Pioneer Valley. There is a strong connectivity to these assets among industries in the area.
- A key ingredient in the future will be improved fiber connectivity, to enable more remote work activity in the region and allow people to work where they recreate and have second homes.
- The large number of colleges and universities, in the Pioneer Valley especially, are increasingly helping draw students to the region who stay past graduation to live and work in the region.
- *Post Event Comment from Rick Sullivan of EDC of Western Massachusetts:* The EDC was a founding member of the Knowledge Corridor. Recognizing that this Northern CT/Western Mass region does create a Regional Metropolitan area of over 1 Million residents, over 40 colleges and universities and is home to a vibrant manufacturing sector. The group meets monthly and holds a state of region event each year. In Western Mass we recognize that our economy runs more north-south (91 corridor) than east-west. One example of collaboration was the Amazon headquarter search (we can discuss how real it was) but the Western Mass mayors and the EDC supported the Enfield Ct bid...we recognized that many residents could find employment, businesses could have opportunities in supply chains and new people might move to the region....certainly more opportunities than if Amazon went to Suffolk Downs property.
- *Post-Event Q&A (Responses from Peter Stasiowski of Interprint):*  
Q: From Gary Schiff: The Berkshires are a “new housing desert.” We are sorely lacking in market rate and affordable housing stock. The current Covid land rush has exacerbated this situation, and this shortage is a huge liability to companies seeking to attract employees to the area. Do any of the panelists have executable solutions to this challenge?  
A: 100% agree, this is something that directly affects the business community’s ability to grow by bringing talent into the region. After basically flatlining for a decade, real estate prices have only recently started to rise, so there are still good opportunities for buyers. But the rental market has been tight for years and is getting worse. It may take a new round of targeted tax incentives to move the needle.

Q: From Branner Stewart: The W. MA market instantly becomes at least two times larger if you add in Greater Hartford. How does the region leverage its own assets with those that are available in Northern CT for greater gain?

A: The proposed Pittsfield – Danbury passenger rail project (<https://traincampaign.org/>) would certainly help connect the Berkshires and NW Connecticut, and a limited relationship between Hartford and Springfield exists. But getting all parties together for the greater good will require agreement and shared investments by the political leadership from both states. Not throwing stones, but it's something the folks working on the Train Campaign have run into over and over again.

Q: From Cynthia Simison: We've been having this very same discussion for years, if not decades about Western Massachusetts and its value. Are there one or two key things which you feel must happen to solidify what I think all of us agree is Massachusetts' best kept secret. What's going to be a true gamechanger.

A: There is no magic bullet. We have to recognize the magnetic pull of New York, Boston, Albany and Hartford has been around for centuries and isn't going away anytime soon. But this proximity and comparatively low economic development costs means Western Mass. is perfectly positioned to attract businesses in the supply chain for companies in all 4 metros. Improving our ground transportation infrastructure, streamlining business startup administration and investing in the education and training of our workforce are all part of the long-term solution.