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A Generational Opportunity at Willam Stanley Business Park

by Ben Sosne

PITTSFIELD — I recently took a trip to Worcester and liked what I saw. About a year ago, I went to Worcester with Michael Coakley, the director of economic development for the city of Pittsfield. We visited with Jon Weaver, President & CEO of Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives. MBI is a private, independent economic development organization based in Worcester that serves as a catalyst for life science and healthcare innovation. They help start biomedical companies and create jobs within the life science industry by providing bench and lab space and trained staff for “seed stage” companies. MBI was formed in 1985, formulating a strategic economic development effort aimed at leveraging local assets — UMass Medicine Science Park, UMass Medical School, and a strong academic base — to unlock the potential of a strong commercial base. MBI launched eight major innovation centers, of which they currently operate four totaling 50,000-square feet. Since its inception, MBI has helped spawn over 150 companies and created over 2,500 jobs. MBI has also been at the center of related collaborative efforts in Worcester.

In 2015, MBI hosted a biomanufacturing summit with over 70 industry professionals. They discussed the wave of biomanufacturing across the Commonwealth, and the opportunities presented for local economic development. At the summit, MBI presented a white paper urging surplus state land in the city be converted into a biomanufacturing park. That white paper led to the formation of the Worcester Biomanufacturing Initiative, a collaboration with broad support from industry, academia, and governmental partners. Two years later, because of the group’s work, a 46-acre master-planned biomanufacturing campus was born on land adjacent to the UMass Medicine Science Park, UMass Medical School, and one of the Worcester’s leading life science firms. Named the “Reactory,” the park is marketed as providing pad ready sites for growing biomanufacturing companies “within close proximity of Cambridge and the entire Massachusetts life science supercluster.”

As new companies have formed and new jobs opened in and around the park, Worcester has surged. From 2010 to 2020, the city saw a 14 percent growth in population, the highest growth rate of any of New England’s 10 largest cities. In 2022, U.S. News & World Report ranked Worcester as among the top 100 best cities to live in the U.S., ahead of larger cities like Chicago, Atlanta, and Honolulu. Coakley and I left Worcester blown away. The energy of the young companies sprouting out of MBI was contagious and seemed to be fueling related public and private investment, including the new Polar Park, the home of the Worcester Red Sox. Our conversation with Weaver, however, left a bigger impact. Weaver stressed that the growth did not happen overnight, that it took years of incremental movement to gain momentum and credited their ultimate success to thoughtful strategic planning efforts and committed collaboration by government, academia, and local industry.



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Leaders were very deliberate in identifying the region's existing assets and finding creative ways to leverage those assets to bring new opportunities.

The visit to Worcester and our conversation with Weaver left a strong impression and seems particularly relevant to revisit now. As was highlighted in last month's issue of this publication, Mayor Linda M. Tyler recently announced that the city of Pittsfield has secured \$10.8 million for redevelopment efforts at the 52-acre William Stanley Business Park, the former industrial facility operated by General Electric that also houses the Berkshire Innovation Center. Specifically, the funds are allocated for Site 9, the park's largest and most prominent section, which consists of 16.5 acres located at the corner of Woodlawn Avenue and Tyler Street. Portions of Site 9 are covered in concrete foundations and pavement that once supported 16 GE buildings, and the funding will be used to cap the debris with green space and add roadways and utility lines for future development.

The BIC has brought life to land that sat as rubble for too long, and the latest stack of funding is a major hurdle in the effort to return vibrancy to the full 52-acre site. The wave of momentum is strong, and with that momentum comes pressure to lock in developers and see new buildings sprout. I would urge a thoughtful pause. We are talking about a tremendous amount of land in a prime location in the heart of the biggest city in the county, steps from downtown and adjacent to some of our region's strongest and most engaged employers and developers. The pieces already in place and the timing of the public money present a generational opportunity to create a new engine for economic growth, for Pittsfield and for the Berkshires.

And to be perfectly clear: while this article began with a gushing assessment of the rise of Worcester, I am in no way suggesting that the recipe that worked in that city is the recipe that will work here. The lesson to be learned from Worcester is in intentional process that they went through to lay the foundation for the growth that we see today. Private industry, academic partners, and governmental leaders were all engaged, identified the region's most strengths and weaknesses, and together built a comprehensive and tailored plan for strategic growth.

I meet amazing minds every day at the Innovation Center — leaders from the private sector, from our educational partners, and from local and state government. Let's bring a diverse set of these leaders around a table and task them with envisioning a comprehensive strategic plan and a process for how such a plan should be implemented so that we maximize this opportunity and chart a course that will drive our region for the next generation. Opportunities can be missed, they can be bungled, or they can be seized. At the BIC, we live by the maxim that "collective wisdom always wins." To seize the opportunity in our own backyard, we need to put that maxim to work.