

Pittsfield Seeks New Day, Not an Echo of Its Heyday

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Community Spotlight

By JACLYN C. STEVENSON

The pervasive feeling in the city of Pittsfield — the Berkshires' largest city and county seat — is that it's done trying to return to its heyday.

Rather, elected officials, business-development professionals, and entrepreneurs alike are calling for a new day in Pittsfield, one that celebrates the creative economy, makes great use of existing resources, and stands ready for entrepreneurial endeavors of all types and sizes.

Mayor Linda Tyer, who took office in January and will serve Pittsfield's first-ever four-year mayoral term, made these tenets some of her key platform points during her campaign, and the message appears to have resonated. The former Pittsfield City Clerk defeated two-term incumbent Mayor Daniel Bianchi with 59% of the vote, winning all 14 precincts.

Tyer said the city has long suffered from what she calls "group depression" following the departure of General Electric, which became part of the Pittsfield landscape in 1903 and at its peak provided 13,000 jobs in a city of 50,000 residents. Its influence on the city's economy dwindled steadily through the '70s, '80s, and '90s, but many people long held hope that another outfit similar in size and scope may someday return.



Corydon Thurston says GE served Pittsfield well, but long gone are the days when the city should strive to be a one-industry town.

Mayor Linda Tyer Embarks on First Term in Pittsfield

BusinessWest spoke with Pittsfield's Mayor Linda Tyer on day 11 of her administration.

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"Pittsfield has a tendency to say, 'someone is out there,'" Tyer noted. "But we've already seen that one business will only be able to sustain us for so long. I'm interested in who is already here, on the cusp of expansion or ready for something new. In the end, the best investment is local, big or small."

Corydon Thurston, executive director of the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority (PEDA), has a similar, if not more concentrated, view of the city and its opportunities for business development.

“The chances of landing a major corporation are akin to winning Powerball,” he explained. “Today, competition isn’t just statewide, it’s worldwide, and finally the realization here is that we need to support who we already have, help them grow, and find ancillary opportunities for additional growth and added diversity — not create another a one-industry town.”

If You Build It...

The largest development currently underway is the creation of the Berkshire Innovation Center (BIC), which will be located at the William Stanley Business Park (created at the massive former GE complex) and cater to small and medium-sized businesses positioned to add to the supply chain of various life-science and biotechnology projects.

“The BIC is designed to provide access to high-tech equipment that will allow businesses to innovate, grow, and respond to customer demands in an efficient and timely fashion — rapidly prototyping products and bringing them to market,” Thurston said. “Temporary space will be available for lease within the center to allow companies to mature, and hopefully they will stick around. Pittsfield has plenty of existing manufacturing space at low cost, and once we get them here, we can grow them here.”

He added that support of the BIC, which was made possible by a \$9.75 million state grant, has been citywide and dovetails with a number of other initiatives in the areas of workforce training, real-estate development, and education. In the coming year, PEDA is expected to blend its efforts with 1Berkshire, a regional economic-development organization, and Pittsfield’s Office of Community Development.

“One of the reasons why we’re so bullish on the innovation center is it has a broad base of community support at every level,” Thurston went on. We also believe that a young startup company, whether it’s in Worcester, Boston, Albany, or Rensselaer, that is looking for a place to commercialize or test their ideas and inventions, will be attracted here because of our existing manufacturing structure and lower costs of doing business.”

A built-in mentor network will be part of the BIC’s offerings, with 19 mentoring partners from across Pittsfield already signed on, along with several academic partners from across the Northeast, including UMass and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

“The support from the education side is rewarding to me because it’s a foundational element that will create a number of new opportunities for our industrial base,” Thurston said, noting that Berkshire Community College has been a particularly active participant.

In the absence of a physical building, for instance, BCC has taken the lead on the programmatic components of the center, identified a variety of courses to complement the BIC’s eventual hands-on work, and set up a temporary center at Pittsfield’s Taconic High School that includes a pipeline for students to pursue advanced-manufacturing careers.

Hire Education

Ellen Kennedy, president of Berkshire Community College, echoed Thurston’s excitement for the BIC.

“This could be the most promising economic-development engine to enter Pittsfield in a long time,” she said. “As the facility itself comes into play, training opportunities are already in place that allow existing businesses to share research and identify workforce-development needs.”

Kennedy said BCC has been instrumental in identifying academic opportunities for Pittsfield students from grade school to college, as well as career-development and refresher courses for the workforce. It received \$500,000 in funding from the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center last year in order to create educational components to support the BIC, such as the purchase of state-of-the-art equipment and new courses in advanced manufacturing and

engineering technology, and another \$10,000 just last month to fund career-path programming for middle- and high-school students.

The BIC has also become the new lead organization of the Berkshire Robotics Initiative, with an eye toward underscoring the use of robotics in today's manufacturing world and the career opportunities that may arise.

"We're looking to build on students' interests, allow them to see the different employment opportunities open to them, and start them on a career path," Kennedy noted, adding that this and other projects have the dual benefit of increasing the college's profile among prospective students, and therefore that of the city, which has an aging population.

"Berkshire County's demographics are challenging, and it has become the job of both Pittsfield and BCC to keep the younger population engaged," she told BusinessWest. "In a sense, we're making a commitment to the Millennial."

For Kennedy, that means offering more opportunities for the community to visit the campus, be it to play sports, attend a career fair, or utilize campus amenities. By extension, she hopes the city's cultural destinations, retail shops, eateries, and nightlife will also get a boost.

"In order to attract people here to experience what we have to offer, we all need to market the quality of life and the world-class culture. In that respect, we are tied at the hip with the city of Pittsfield."

North Star of Our Nights

That's a construct the team involved with Hotel on North, a boutique hotel on Pittsfield's main thoroughfare that just opened its doors in June, subscribes to as well.

Owned by Berkshire residents David and Laurie Tierney and managed by Main Street Hospitality Group, a hotel-management company based in Stockbridge that manages three other properties in the county, Hotel on North includes a restaurant, bar, event space, and gift shop housed in a pair of adjoining 19th-century buildings that are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sarah Eustis, CEO and part-owner of Main Street Hospitality Group, said work between the partners began in earnest in 2012, and moved swiftly into "two solid years of highly collaborative project work."

"We represent two deeply rooted Berkshire businesses with different skills that we wanted to apply to Pittsfield, to contribute to the renaissance that is happening here," she said, noting that a hospitality venue in Pittsfield has been a goal of Main Street Hospitality Group for several years. "We looked originally to Pittsfield to build on a base, and now we have an undying passion that this is right for the city. That belief comes from both gut and numbers."

The hotel features brick walls, tin ceilings, and hardwood floors that hearken back to the buildings' original décor, as well as Victorian themes paired with nods to the Berkshires in the form of vintage maps and organic elements. The scheme is bound together with the 'on North' tagline, i.e. 'Eat, Drink, Stay on North.'

In more ways than one, the entire business was "made on North," said Eustis, by partnering with local vendors and craftsmen whenever possible, from architects to designers to furniture and décor makers.

"We like to create hotels that give you a sense of where you are, and we realized early on that it had to be 'by Pittsfield for Pittsfield,' with influences from around the world. That's one reason we didn't partner with a large brand or make a slick New York hotel and plop it in the Berkshires," she went on. "The 'on North' concept arose from that idea of using local businesses."

One of the hotel's owners, Laurie Tierney, added that she hopes its luxurious feel paired with local accents will instill a feeling of pride in Pittsfield's residents, and attract them downtown along with other visitors to the region.

“My goal is to change perceptions so people realize what’s downtown and feel safe,” she said. “The locals need to be brought into the change, and I do believe that there is a movement afoot.”

Sometimes, Tierney added, getting big things to happen in a city is like starting a lawnmower.

“You pull the cord, but it often takes a few times to start. That’s how it’s been in Pittsfield ... almost, not quite, almost, not quite. I’m hoping this is what turns the engine.”

Indeed, it’s been nearly 90 years since GE made Pittsfield a boom town, and many people are now seeing the city’s heyday as something ahead of them, not behind. The key, says Tierney, is to maintain momentum.

“We can’t stop; we have to keep going,” she said. “I hope to be in a place someday where I can sit back and watch the ball roll a little, and maybe be a background person who whispers in someone’s ear, ‘hey. You know what we should do?’”

One person Tierney may be able to whisper to is Mayor Tyer.

“I’m interested in anyone who wants to make an investment in the city,” Tyer said in conclusion. “The idea of a hip, walkable urban center is coming back, and we have the infrastructure for it. Now, we just need to be plugged into the modern economy.”

Pittsfield at a glance

Year Incorporated: 1761

Population: 43,697

Area: 42.5 square miles

County: Berkshire

Residential Tax Rate: \$18.76

Commercial Tax Rate: \$38.06

Median Household Income: \$35,655

Family Household Income: \$46,228

Type of Government: Mayor, City Council

Largest Employers: Berkshire

Health Systems, General

Dynamics, Berkshire Community

College, SABIC Innovative Plastics



Sarah Eustis says Hotel on North was designed to reflect the character of its region, with plenty of local contributions.

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