

Chamber weighs evolution of economy

Just as businesses and industries adapt to markets and opportunities, communities and regions must do the same.

In Hampshire County, the evolution of our economy and changes in our demographics are defining a new vision for our region.

Community leaders are responding with a strategy to make the most of our region's opportunities and share its benefits.

Community values of inclusion, creativity, and quality of life are central to our choices for growth. A focus on regionalism and collaboration will require new ways of working across political and geographic boundaries bringing together public, for-profit and nonprofit leaders. A common agenda benefiting all parts of the county will be the catalyst for participation.

Twenty years ago, maybe even 10, no one could have imagined the success of this fall's Art in the Orchard event. At Easthampton's Park Hill Orchard, overlooking Mount Tom, more than 12,000 people attended a festival of public art, apples, storytelling, full-moon orchard walks, and music. The event fulfilled the dream of an Easthampton gallery owner at the once-neglected, 127-acre orchard, with new owners and a commitment to sustainability and community.

This success is not an accident, but instead an artful example of a reinvention of two industries seeded by entrepreneurs and institutions over two decades.

Twenty years ago Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture launched its Be A Local Hero campaign, reversing a decline in agriculture and, between 2002 and 2007, increasing the number of farms by 30 percent, doubling the sales of agricultural products. Farm shares, or CSAs, now feed nearly 40,000 people living in the Pioneer Valley and as far away as Boston. Hampshire County's farms embody our area's values of sustainability and

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the environment.

As Northampton's arts economy evolved from artist studios to a vital marketplace and performance center for

artists, Easthampton's evolved as the "maker" economy. Cottage Street Studios, with 80 artists in residence today, led the transformation of more than half a million square feet of mill buildings.

Today there are four developers creating communities of artists and entrepreneurs at Eastworks, the Paragon Arts and Industry Building, the Brickyard and 180 Mill. In 2006, the city of Easthampton, business leaders and artists created Easthampton City Arts investing in the city's cultural identity to foster the growth of its arts economy. City-backed support attracted the attention of state officials. In 2012 the commonwealth awarded a \$2.75 infrastructure grant for utilities and access connecting the Pleasant Street mill buildings.

In Hampshire County the creative industries are also growing, gaining their competitiveness from our internationally recognized colleges and the University of Massachusetts. These institutions of higher education import talent and incubate business ideas.

The largest independent game studio in Massachusetts is here in Hampshire County. Founded in 2008, Hitpoint Studios employs more than 50 full-time employees. At its studio near the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Hitpoint produces games for clients like Microsoft and Toyota as well as their own mobile and social games. Their website touts Hampshire County's natural beauty, wealth of talent, five colleges and quality of life as "important to the

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evolution of a successful studio."

Growing by nearly 10 percent between 2003 and 2012, the creative industries thrive on Hampshire County's quality of life and talent.

Northampton-based DDM, Digital Development Management, founded in 2005, is the world's leading business and talent agency for video games and digital entertainment.

Another tech company, Citysprout, aggregates demand for CSAs by connecting farms to new customers in the office complexes of metro areas. An online social marketplace helps build the relationship between communities and their local food producers.

Dubbed "hidden tech" about 20 years ago, these companies represent a new generation of businesses that are capable of growing into enterprises employing 50 or more people. That's rare in Hampshire County where 76 percent of our businesses have fewer than 20 employees. And 11 percent have more than 500.

However, their hidden nature hasn't changed. The industry is dispersed. Their interests and needs aren't known. New strategies and collaborations are needed to make the most of their competitive strength and potential benefit to our area.

Demographic trends show that Hampshire County's minority populations are not

benefiting from the county's strengths. While all of the population growth is due to minority populations and immigrants, they are underrepresented amongst the county's leadership.

Between 2003 and 2012 the number of minorities and immigrants increased 30 percent while the entire population grew only 2 percent. Minorities also lag behind in educational attainment and income.

An effective economic opportunity agenda must capitalize on all of the talents in these populations and invest in their education, social structures and workforce readiness.

These examples just begin to describe the issues and challenges Hampshire County leaders are now looking at. By reinventing the arts and agricultural economy, we've learned that success requires entrepreneurial risk, backed by institutional commitment, and community leadership willing to invest and sustain a vision. To live up to a strong value of inclusion, our agenda of growth and opportunity must be inclusive. To be at our best, we need to focus on the region, as well as our local communities.

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