

Blueprint gets grant infusion

Economic strategy targets cultural, regional growth throughout county

By Jennifer Huberdeau, North Adams Transcript

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NORTH ADAMS — A new economic development strategy is in the works for Berkshire County, courtesy of some \$300,000 in grants from the John Adams Innovation Institute and \$450,000 from the federal government.

Spearheaded by the Berkshire Economic Development Corp., the Berkshire Blueprint will combine two separate projects — one focusing on the entire regional economy, the other on the creative arts economy — for the implementation of strategies to spur economic growth.

"We've never seen anything like this in the area before and we never will again. Five years from now, we will look back at this as our watershed moment," said Tyler Fairbank, president of the development corporation. "This will create one overarching strategic plan for the whole region. We have had a lack of a regional economic strategy plan for years. We've done a nice job collaborating in the past, but at one point we had 43 separate nonprofit organizations doing the same thing."

Fairbank said the collaboration began over a year ago, when a group of cultural executives came together with Mount Auburn Associates and drafted a plan to survey the region's cultural attractions and resources to develop a strategy to help grow the area's "creative economy."

"We submitted an application for a \$150,000 grant from the John Adams Innovation Institute in October," Fairbank said.

The group also submitted a grant application to the institute to develop an economic development strategy for the county at the same time.

"At that time, I found out the Department of Commerce was looking to do a evaluative analysis of a rural economy. They've never studied a rural economy before. I felt like Horshack in the back of the room, raising my hand, saying 'Pick me. Pick me,'" Fairbank said, referring to the character from the classic sitcom "Welcome Back, Kotter."

On Jan. 9, the development corporation was notified that both sets of grants had been awarded — \$300,000 from the institute and a \$450,000 grant from the federal government.

Two projects

"We really have two projects going on. In the end, we will blend the two plans together and have a stand-up crisp vision, a strategy and startup plans," Fairbank said. "The pieces of the puzzle are still moving, but we're looking at about \$1 million in planning, organization and implementation funding."

He said preliminary research for both projects, the Berkshire Strategy Project and the Berkshire Creative Economy Project, has begun with 1,000 surveys having been sent out to businesses involved with the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce. A public survey will become available on the BEDC Web site in May.

"This is not just a study. It's all about action. This time we have an organization in place to make it a reality," Fairbank said. "We're going to start this with a good solid foundation."

Kurt Dassel of the Monitor Group, which will oversee work on the Berkshire Strategy Project, said his company will be looking at the overall Berkshire economy.

"We will be looking at the strengths and weaknesses, what the barriers are, examine what should be done and focus on industrial clusters," he said.

Meanwhile, Mount Auburn Associates will be heading the Berkshire Creative Economy Project.

"We will be drilling down on one sector of creative clusters," Michael Kane of Mount Auburn Associates. "We came on to this creative sector niche about five years ago. We've always seen the arts community as an amenity and an enhancement to the economy. We didn't really factor it in."

It wasn't until the group was working in Brunswick, Maine, when members realized that uniting the community of artists, galleries and other art affiliated nonprofits could create an economic engine.

"They create a cultural product, whether it's a dance performance, play, piece of pottery or a museum. They are selling a cultural product and people are consuming it," Kane said. "What we need to do is figure what segments are here, what are missing, what segments are world class and how to improve those other segments. We want to take an undervalued and under-appreciated sector and polish it into the gold it is."

Fairbank said when the Berkshire Blueprint is ready, steering committees made up of members of the business community and other community groups will be ready to implement certain aspects of the plan.

Plan for investment

"This will provide the region with an opportunity we haven't had before. We will have a plan to show companies interested in investing in the region. We will have a plan showing them where we want to go and how we want to grow. We will also have a plan to show at the state and federal level to show them in the investment we have in the region and show them we've got it together," Fairbank said.

The blueprint has a target launch date of Oct. 31.

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