

“Changing the Northern Berkshire narrative: Greylock Economy Working Group brings new energy to table”

The Berkshire Eagle
NEWS

Changing the Northern Berkshire narrative: Greylock Economy Working Group brings new energy to table



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NORTH ADAMS — The faces were familiar but the energy was definitively new.

Nearly 50 Greylock Economy Working Group participants brought their creative flow to a wide and diverse circle, brainstorming and strategizing about capitalizing on existing resources and finding fresh mechanisms to develop and sustain a new regional economy. The contingent met inside the Greylock WORKS space at 508 State Road, with journalist Bill Densmore, a principal of Densmore Associates, serving as facilitator.

Williamstown Theater Festival Associate Director Laura Savia said she embraced the free exchange of ideas.

“I like this kind of energy,” she said. “It’s how I am used to working. The best ideas emerge and carry the day.”

Among those participating with the working group was city Mayor Richard J. Alcombright, Williamstown Selectman Hugh Daley, Greylock mill owners and architects Sal Perry and Karla Rothstein, Adams businessman Jason Koperniak, and Sarah Gardner, former Williamstown Planning Board member.

The narrative

Ideas and action plans did emerge following introductions and about 45 minutes of lively conversation occurring in “nooks,” which were established sections dedicated to groups discussing specific topics.

The city, Williamstown, and Adams must form cohesive groups and work as a collective to attract tourists, entrepreneurs and increase population, said nearly every participant. Equally vital is forgetting the economy of the past.

“We have to change the narrative about everything,” said city schools Superintendent Barbara Malkas.

North Adams Chamber of Commerce program coordinator Ricco Fruscio said he is moving forward with a “2 Degrees NoCo” initiative that follows a Portland, Maine, plan successfully driven by an organized group that



Stephen J. Dadak of Adams speaks during a break-out session in which small groups of people discussed particular issues and brainstorm ideas.

The result was population growth and a boosted economy, Fruscio said.

The initiative depends on area residents to serve as “bridges,” finding and inviting artists, entrepreneurs, small business owners, and others to spend time in the area. It’s a premise requiring a promise to spend a day and evening introducing the guests to the region, he said.

“And you take them to the Clark [Sterling and Francine Clark Art Museum], you take them to Mount Greylock, you take them to Natural Bridge, and then in the evening you take them, maybe to a gala that’s been planned,” he said.

He challenged participants to bring 15 new people to the area this fall and show off all that the region has to offer.

Form work groups

Enthusiastic dialogue led to sharing plans focused on developing formal working groups, seeking small business advisers, tackling vacancies in downtowns via creative means, and forming locally focused venture capital funds.

Reducing empty storefronts along main streets means new approaches, such as encouraging artists to try leasing space as a group and sharing it. Business mentors could offer many types of assistance, including successful transition of business ownership. The goal is to keep businesses operating as opposed to watching ventures shut down because a change of ownership sale was unsuccessful.

While in group sessions, Fruscio noted that an article appearing two years ago identified North Adams as the No. 2 choice of places (in its size designation) for artists in their 20s and 30s.

“And we haven’t invited them yet,” he said.

Acting Berkshire Eagle Publisher Martin Langeveld said that there are numerous attractions for millennials, including hiking and biking trails, restaurants, cultural venues and other amenities.

“You’ve got to create a great business environment,” he said and encouraged bringing mentors and increased access to business financing to the region.

Erase disparity

Including all Northern Berkshire residents in any economic renaissance is imperative as is erasing income, social and educational disparities among the communities, said numerous participants including Judy Grinnell.

Grinnell said she’s lived for many years in the city and Williamstown.

“I was never comfortable with the disparities between the town and the city,” she said.

At the outset of the meeting, many participants said supporting and helping build existing business is equally important as bringing in new enterprises.

Eric Kerns, co-founder of Bright Ideas brewing and partner and project manager for the Redwood Motel project, said generating ideas isn’t a problem for the region.

“Our gap is not idea creation, it’s idea execution,” he said.

Caretaker Farm original co-founder Sam Smith talked about recognizing efforts made by local businesses and cited The Eagle as an example.

“The Berkshire Eagle is not only working on sustaining itself but improving,” Smith said.

Eagle newspaper circulation is up by 1,350 copies per day since New England Newspapers Inc. was purchased by locally owned Birdland Acquisition LLC, Eagle Vice President of Audience Development Warren Dews announced this past week.

The region is poised for significant change, said City Councilor Nancy Bullet.

“There’s a lot in the incubator and it’s exciting to see so much bridging of the gaps to make the Berkshires a home for all,” she said.



About 60 members of the community united for three hours on a hot, humid night, in a building with no air-conditioning for a collaborative discussion on the Northern Berkshire economy at the Greylock Mill in North Adams on Thursday.