







WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS ECONOMIC ECOSYSTEM SUMMIT

Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Report

Four Counties, Nine Convenings, One Longitudinal Regional Record — Findings, Methodology, Regional Intelligence Framework, and a Shared Advocacy Platform

Springfield Creative City Collective | 1Berkshire

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> Berkshire · Franklin · Hampshire · Hampden — a four-county record of the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit series, 2023–2026.

Letter to the Region

Western Massachusetts is not short on assets, ideas, institutions, or people committed to its future. Across Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties, communities have built economic-development organizations, cultural institutions, universities, planning agencies, small businesses, manufacturing capacity, food systems, clean-energy initiatives, tourism economies, neighborhood networks, and deep civic leadership. The persistent challenge is not whether these assets exist; it is whether the region can connect them consistently enough to turn distributed strength into shared regional outcomes.

The Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit series was built to examine that question through practice. What began as ecosystem mapping and a local convening experiment evolved through repeated listening, relationship-building, geographic rotation, shared leadership, and redesign. By the fifth convening, the series had reached all four Western Massachusetts counties. By the ninth, it had become a multi-year regional record of what stakeholders were seeing, where conditions converged, where counties differed, and what kinds of connective infrastructure were needed to move from recognition to implementation.

This report is the culmination of that planned learning process. It is also an act of knowledge preservation as the Springfield Creative City Collective concludes its organizational work. The goal is not to transfer ownership of SCCC or preserve an organization beyond its intended life. The goal is to ensure that the relationships, regional intelligence, methodological lessons, and policy priorities developed through the Summit series remain available to the region that created them.

The report therefore does two things at once: it documents what was learned, and it converts that learning into a shared advocacy platform. The platform is not a claim that every community needs the same intervention. It is a framework for advocating together while respecting the very different market, geographic, institutional, demographic, and infrastructure conditions that exist across the four counties.

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Executive Summary

Between 2023 and 2026, the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit (WMEES) developed from an early ecosystem-mapping and convening effort into a four-county, cross-sector regional learning process. Across nine convenings, the series engaged economic-development organizations, municipalities, entrepreneurs, funders, state agencies, researchers, cultural institutions, planning bodies, private-sector partners, educators, public-health leaders, and community stakeholders. The series was intentionally iterative as each convening generated observations, relationships, feedback, and questions that shaped the next.

> **CORE CONCLUSION**
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> Western Massachusetts does not primarily suffer from an absence of plans or assets. Across the evidence reviewed for this report, the recurring challenge is the conversion of assets, programs, research, and relationships into durable outcomes through accessible systems, implementation capacity, cross-county connectivity, and sustained institutional ownership.

The report draws on WMEES primary materials, including 2023 baseline surveys of 45 entrepreneurs/business respondents and 22 stakeholder respondents, registration and convening records, steering-committee discussions, event documentation, and participant observation. It also places those findings in conversation with independent regional and statewide research on housing, infrastructure, rural development, entrepreneurship, clean energy, creative economy, and inclusive growth. This effort has a designated purpose of triangulation, where independent sources identify the same issue over time. This report treats recurrence as evidence worthy of implementation attention rather than as a new discovery.

Seven cross-cutting findings organize the report:

- First, the region has an asset-to-outcome gap where strong institutions and sectors do not automatically become shared regional outcomes.
- Second, recommendation persistence matters as capital access, infrastructure, housing, coordination, workforce, and administrative capacity recur across studies separated by years.
- Third, implementation capacity is itself economic infrastructure.
- Fourth, access to a statewide resource is not the same as practical accessibility as staffing, match requirements, reimbursement structures, grant complexity, and local fiscal capacity shape who can use programs.
- Fifth, regional equity requires differentiated implementation rather than identical treatment.

- Sixth, relationships and intermediary organizations function as knowledge infrastructure.
- Seventh, housing, transportation, workforce, energy, entrepreneurship, culture, public health, and community development operate as an ecosystem rather than isolated silos.

The advocacy platform translates those findings into five priority areas: economic development, capital access, and business support; infrastructure, transportation, and energy; housing and quality of place; community, culture, and environment; and workforce, education, and demographics. Across all five areas, the platform calls for four-county coordination, warm-referral systems, rural and municipal capacity, accessible state program design, measurable implementation pathways, and preservation of regional knowledge infrastructure.

The report extends the Summit's longitudinal analysis through a Regional Intelligence Framework developed through the WMEES research process; a detailed examination of public investment from need recognition through resident outcome; analysis of the organizational and human costs of competitive resource access; alignment with Berkshire and Franklin County strategy; shared responsibility between the Commonwealth and regional stakeholders; and an inquiry into how Western Massachusetts understands and communicates its contemporary identity.

The expanded framework distinguishes the Asset-to-Outcome Gap, Recommendation Persistence, Structural Persistence, Implementation Capacity, Administrative Accessibility, Access Cost, Translation Gap, Human Sustainability, the Announcement–Implementation Gap, the Appropriation-to-Impact Gap, the Need-to-Recognition Gap, Differential Regional Impact, Knowledge Infrastructure, Regional Connectivity, Regional Equity, Research-to-Accountability, Institutional Learning Capacity, Gap-Investment Infrastructure, and Shared Responsibility. These terms are analytical tools developed through synthesis of WMEES findings and external research; they are not presented as terminology created by the cited external authors.

A central proposition of the report is reciprocal. The Commonwealth has responsibility for equitable investment, accessible programs, transparent implementation, technical assistance, and institutional responsiveness. Western Massachusetts has responsibility for using existing gap-investment infrastructure, maintaining authentic relationships with state partners, developing project pipelines, documenting barriers accurately, preserving regional intelligence, and communicating the distinct needs of its communities. Shared responsibility is not a substitute for equitable public investment; it is a condition of effective implementation.

How to Use This Report

Municipalities can use this report to identify shared regional barriers and opportunities for joint advocacy or pooled capacity. State and federal policymakers can use it to distinguish program availability from practical accessibility. Economic-development organizations and funders can identify coordination and implementation gaps without duplicating existing institutions. Researchers can interpret the Summit record as a qualitative longitudinal source alongside quantitative data. Community and sector partners can use the advocacy platform to build coalitions while adapting implementation to local conditions.






Key Definitions

Access Cost: The financial, administrative, temporal, operational, and human resources expended to pursue a resource, including costs incurred when the pursuit does not result in funding.

Administrative Accessibility: The practical ability of a municipality, business, organization, or resident to understand, apply for, receive, manage, and deploy a formally available resource.

Announcement–Implementation Gap: The period and processes separating the public announcement of a policy, appropriation, program, or investment from functioning implementation.

Appropriation-to-Impact Gap: The broader distance between public resources authorized for a purpose and measurable change experienced by the intended beneficiary.

Asset-to-Outcome Gap: The distance between the existence of regional assets and the measurable outcomes those assets are capable of producing.

Differential Regional Impact: The possibility that a statewide policy or investment produces materially different effects because geography, markets, infrastructure, demographics, fiscal resources, and institutional capacity differ.

Economic Ecosystem: The network of people, institutions, markets, infrastructure, public systems, capital, relationships, and community conditions that shape economic participation and growth.

Gap-Investment Infrastructure: The technical assistance, planning capacity, intermediaries, relationships, data systems, project pipelines, grant-development resources, matching resources, and implementation supports that connect identified needs to investment.

Human Sustainability: The capacity of people responsible for community and economic-development work to maintain sufficient financial stability, well-being, professional longevity, civic participation, and quality of life to remain meaningfully engaged over time.

Implementation Capacity: The staffing, expertise, financing, relationships, project readiness, administrative systems, and institutional ownership required to move from an idea or appropriation to execution and measurable outcomes.

Institutional Learning Capacity: The ability of public and regional institutions to convert longitudinal data, community intelligence, implementation experience, and prior crises into earlier detection and improved policy design.

Knowledge Infrastructure: Relationships, convenings, records, intermediaries, shared data, and institutional memory that allow a region to preserve and transfer learning.

Need-to-Recognition Gap: The period between the emergence of a measurable condition and institutional recognition at a level sufficient to generate coordinated public action.

Public Investment Pathway: A method for tracking a public investment from need and policy recognition through appropriation, program design, application, award, expenditure, implementation, and resident outcome.

Recommendation Persistence: The recurrence of substantially similar recommendations across studies, plans, convenings, institutions, and periods of time.

Regional Connectivity: The capacity to coordinate issues that cross municipal and county boundaries while preserving meaningful differences among communities.

Regional Equity: Fair opportunity to access resources and implementation tools calibrated to actual geographic, economic, demographic, institutional, and infrastructure conditions.

Research-to-Accountability: The use of accumulated regional research to track what was recommended, what followed, what changed, what did not, and why.

Rhizomatic Structure: A distributed network structure in which leadership, knowledge, and relationships can grow through multiple interconnected nodes rather than a single permanent center of authority.

Shared Responsibility: The principle that equitable regional advancement requires reciprocal responsibility among the Commonwealth and regional stakeholders.

Structural Persistence: The continued presence of an underlying condition despite repeated recognition, intervention, investment, or policy attention.

Translation Gap: The difference between how participation in a public-resource system is experienced by applicants and how the same participation may be interpreted or reported by administering institutions.

Warm Referral: A supported connection in which a trusted intermediary helps move a person or organization to an appropriate resource rather than simply providing a list or link.

Western Massachusetts / Four-County Region: Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties. The report treats the four counties as interconnected but not interchangeable.

CHAPTER 1

Why a Four-County Economic Ecosystem Strategy Was Needed



Regional context and the fragmentation problem

Western Massachusetts is frequently described as a region, but many of the systems that shape economic development operate through different geographies, municipalities, planning districts, labor markets, state program boundaries, cultural networks, philanthropic service areas, tourism regions, and sector-specific institutions. Those overlapping jurisdictions create real expertise, but they do not automatically create a shared four-county strategy. The result can be a region rich in organizations yet difficult to navigate across institutional and geographic boundaries.

The WMEES process began from a practical observation. Stakeholders often knew their own networks well but did not necessarily have repeated opportunities to understand the full regional system. Berkshire County was especially important to this learning. Moving the Summit westward required participants from the Pioneer Valley to test whether “regional” collaboration would include reciprocal travel and sustained relationship-building rather than expecting the Berkshires to enter Pioneer Valley-centered spaces. Franklin County raised related questions about rural municipal capacity, distance, transportation, and the design of programs built around larger-population assumptions.

The initial hypothesis was therefore relational as much as programmatic. We tested whether stronger relationships, shared information, rotating geography, and collective reflection could improve the region’s ability to identify common priorities, understand differences, make referrals, build shared language, and advocate with greater coherence.

Connection to MassDevelopment Transformative Development Initiative Creative Cities and the Barr Foundation

The institutional pathway that supported SCCC illustrates the layered public-private-local structure that would later become relevant to the Regional Intelligence Framework itself. The Barr Foundation provided private philanthropic investment to MassDevelopment, the Commonwealth's development finance agency and land bank, to develop and test arts-based approaches to economic development through the Transformative Development Initiative (TDI). In 2020, MassDevelopment used a $1.3 million Barr Foundation award to launch TDI Creative Cities in New Bedford, building on TDI's existing place-based economic-development model. By 2022, Barr's cumulative support to MassDevelopment for Gateway City arts-based programming had reached $4.4 million, and MassDevelopment expanded TDI Creative Cities to Springfield, Fitchburg, and Lynn through a two-year, $1.605 million investment. The model combined five strategies—staff support, implementation funding, partnership development, leadership training, and place designation—and was intentionally designed to strengthen local creative infrastructure beyond the grant period.

In Springfield, implementation depended on a locally organized partnership rather than a state agency acting alone. MassDevelopment selected a partnership led by Black and Brown Wall Street, Art for the Soul Gallery, and Valley Venture Mentors, with additional support from an extensive list of community partners. MassDevelopment described the Springfield work as focused on technical assistance and professional development for underserved participants in the creative economy and on strengthening structures for cross-cultural collaboration and creative and cultural empowerment. Contemporary reporting documents the local organizing that preceded the award: a Springfield planning committee had been meeting to identify community crisis points, study local history and economic conditions, develop solutions, and pursue resources. The resulting proposal articulated a two-year strategy to “Heal, Empower, Invest and Sustain” Springfield's creative economy. Reporting at the time identified $223,000 for the first year and $312,000 for the second, demonstrating how philanthropic capital, state administration and technical infrastructure, and community-level design and implementation converged within a single initiative.

SCCC therefore emerged neither as an isolated organization nor simply as the recipient of a grant. It developed inside an intentional place-based implementation structure in which Barr supplied philanthropic capital and strategic investment, MassDevelopment/TDI provided statewide administration, economic-development infrastructure and program architecture, and Springfield-based partners supplied local knowledge, relationships, program design, and implementation. Over time, SCCC extended lessons from that structure beyond the creative economy: relationships could function as infrastructure; local knowledge could shape investment; technical assistance and funding were most useful when connected to implementation capacity; and place-based work could become a platform for broader cross-sector economic inquiry. WMEES did not replace the EDC, REDOs, planning commissions, municipalities, state agencies, or sector-specific organizations.

Rather, it expanded the connective logic learned through Creative Cities—eventually using convening, distributed leadership, cross-county learning, and shared research to examine how those institutions and sectors interact across the larger Western Massachusetts economic ecosystem.

Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council: Institutional Partnership and Regional Legitimacy

The relationship between WMEES and the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council (EDC) was not peripheral to the Summit series. The EDC became one of its most significant institutional partners, serving as a lead sponsor across the convenings and lending financial support, regional reach, institutional credibility, and established economic-development relationships to an emerging model of cross-sector and cross-county collaboration. A former EDC Vice President also served on the WMEES Steering Committee, creating a direct connection between the region's established economic-development infrastructure and the evolving Summit process. This participation mattered. WMEES was intentionally experimental in structure: it crossed county, sector, institutional, and traditional economic-development boundaries, and its legitimacy was strengthened when an organization with the EDC's regional standing chose not only to participate, but to invest in the work, contribute leadership, and trust its alignment with the region's broader economic-development priorities.

That partnership also grew from an existing network of relationships rather than beginning with WMEES. EDC annual reports and organizational records document a broader programmatic relationship involving the EDC, Valley Venture Mentors (VVM), and the entrepreneurial and economic-development ecosystem from which portions of SCCC's work emerged. WMEES therefore should not be understood as an alternative to the region's established economic-development institutions. It developed partly through relationships with them. The EDC brought institutional history, private-sector relationships, regional visibility, and economic-development infrastructure; VVM contributed entrepreneurial networks and experience building pathways for founders and businesses; and SCCC brought a place-based, creative-economy and community-engagement orientation that increasingly expanded into regional systems inquiry. The Summit series created a shared space in which these perspectives and those of municipalities, planning agencies, state partners, educational institutions, funders, businesses, cultural organizations, and community stakeholders, could interact rather than remain confined to their respective institutional or sectoral silos.

The EDC's involvement is also significant to the longer history of regional identity formation examined in this report. Its earlier attempts to position and market Western Massachusetts—including the publicly debated 2017 “West Mass” branding effort—demonstrate that questions of regional identity, economic positioning, talent attraction, tourism, and external perception predated WMEES. WMEES inherited rather than originated that unresolved regional question. What changed through the Summit process was the breadth of institutions and communities invited to

interrogate it together. In that sense, the EDC's relationship to WMEES represents both continuity and evolution: an established regional economic-development institution with significant convening power and credibility chose to invest in an emerging collaborative process, while WMEES created an additional mechanism for bringing economic development into sustained conversation with arts and culture, entrepreneurship, education, workforce, housing, infrastructure, climate and energy, rural development, public policy, and community experience. The partnership demonstrates one of the central lessons of the Summit series itself: new regional infrastructure does not have to displace existing institutions; it can become more powerful when established institutions use their standing, relationships, resources, and trust to help emerging forms of regional collaboration take root.







Research questions

- What economic-development resources and institutions already exist across the four counties, and how are they connected?
- What barriers recur for entrepreneurs, municipalities, organizations, and communities?
- How do stakeholders navigate referrals, capital, technical assistance, and state programs?
- Which priorities recur across counties, and which require place-specific approaches?
- What does meaningful four-county collaboration require in practice?
- What forms of knowledge and implementation infrastructure should be preserved after a convening initiative or intermediary organization ends?

CHAPTER 2

Methodology and Evidence Base



An emergent, iterative methodology

The Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit (WMEES) evolved through an emergent, iterative methodology grounded in collaborative design thinking, intentional relationship-building, and a commitment to confronting the organizational, geographic, and historical biases that have shaped economic development across Western Massachusetts. Rather than beginning with a predetermined four-county structure, the initiative allowed its geographic reach, thematic priorities, partnerships, and leadership practices to develop through sustained stakeholder engagement and collective learning. Each Summit functioned as both a convening and an opportunity to examine emerging regional conditions, challenge institutional assumptions, and apply lessons learned to subsequent gatherings.

A pivotal decision emerged during Summit #2 in Springfield, when participants recognized that meaningful regional collaboration required moving beyond familiar institutional networks and geographic centers of influence. Following two consecutive gatherings in Springfield, it became imperative that subsequent Summits travel throughout Western Massachusetts, engaging communities within their distinct geographic, economic, and cultural contexts. This decision reflected a deliberate effort to confront longstanding patterns of institutional concentration, uneven regional representation, and organizational assumptions that can privilege certain communities, perspectives, and forms of expertise over others. Addressing these biases directly became a defining element of the initiative's methodology, shaping both where convenings occurred and whose experiences informed the regional conversation.

Summit #3 in Orange, Franklin County, marked the initiative's first convening outside Hampden County and intentionally prioritized rural economic needs, development opportunities, and the distinct challenges facing smaller municipalities and communities. The gathering also established WMEES's first partnership with an elected official, Massachusetts State Senator Jo Comerford,

strengthening the relationship between regional stakeholder dialogue and legislative engagement. Together, these developments demonstrated how geographic inclusion, rural representation, and public-sector partnership could become interconnected elements of the initiative's evolving approach.

Summit #4 in Pittsfield, Berkshire County, marked another significant stage in the initiative's development. Alongside the first formal use of the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit name, the gathering expanded the regional conversation and deepened the initiative's understanding of cross-county economic alignment. A featured discussion brought together a mayor from Hampden County, a mayor from Berkshire County, a state agency vice president, and a municipal economic development executive to examine the region's present conditions and future opportunities. Their exchange brought different municipal and institutional perspectives into direct conversation, illuminating shared regional priorities alongside the distinct economic realities, resources, and development strategies of individual communities. This dialogue reinforced the importance of approaching regional collaboration through interconnected but differentiated local conditions.

Summit #5 in Hadley, Hampshire County, completed the initiative's first convening cycle across all four Western Massachusetts counties while marking a significant expansion in civic and governmental engagement. Through a legislative luncheon and a dedicated mayoral and town management panel, the gathering brought together state legislators, municipal executives, elected officials, and community stakeholders to examine economic development from multiple levels of governance. These discussions explored local development challenges, regional initiatives, and opportunities for cross-county collaboration, reinforcing the importance of connecting community priorities with municipal decision-making and broader public policy. The convening demonstrated how intentional geographic expansion could strengthen relationships across jurisdictions and create opportunities for more coordinated regional dialogue and action.

Subsequent Summits returned to participating counties, allowing the network to revisit recurring challenges, deepen institutional relationships, and examine how priorities evolved across different communities and periods. These return visits strengthened the initiative's capacity to develop a longitudinal regional record rather than a collection of isolated events. They also created opportunities to assess the persistence of previously identified needs, incorporate emerging perspectives, and refine the initiative's understanding of the relationships between local conditions and broader regional systems.

Throughout this evolution, WMEES followed a collaborative design-thinking process: convene, observe, listen, test, reflect, adapt, and reconvene. Stakeholder participation, county-specific conditions, emerging issues, institutional partnerships, and lessons from previous gatherings continuously informed subsequent decisions. Geographic expansion, organizational identity, research priorities, and distributed leadership therefore emerged through practice rather than a fixed organizational blueprint. Through this approach, WMEES developed into an evolving form of

regional knowledge infrastructure, connecting community experience, municipal leadership, institutional expertise, and public-sector partnerships to strengthen cross-county understanding, confront historical and organizational biases, and support more equitable, coordinated economic development.







Rhizomatic regional learning

The concept of rhizomatic structure, introduced into the WMEES initiative through the insights and contributions of Olana Flynn, multidisciplinary artist, educator, curator, and Co-Director of LOCULUS Collective, provided an important framework for interpreting and understanding the network's evolving relationships and distributed leadership. Rather than operating through a single institutional center or fixed hierarchy, WMEES developed through interconnected stakeholders whose expertise, relationships, and contributions shaped the initiative's direction.

This approach was evident in the decision following Summit #2 to move beyond Springfield and engage communities throughout the region. In Orange, rural economic priorities and a partnership with Senator Jo Comerford expanded the network's geographic and legislative connections. In Pittsfield, municipal and state economic-development perspectives strengthened cross-county dialogue. In Hadley, legislative engagement and municipal leadership further connected local priorities with broader public systems. Each convening created new relationships and opportunities that informed subsequent gatherings, allowing leadership and knowledge to emerge from different parts of the network.

Rhizomatic learning also shaped the initiative's research methodology. Insights from entrepreneurs, creatives, municipal leaders, economic-development organizations, and community stakeholders could be examined across county boundaries and connected with institutional research and public policy. This lateral exchange enabled WMEES to identify recurring regional challenges while preserving the distinct conditions of individual communities. Through Olana Flynn's contribution to the initiative's understanding of rhizomatic organizing, WMEES gained a useful framework for recognizing its distributed leadership, evolving partnerships, and collective production of regional knowledge.

Distributed Leadership, Steering Committee Stewardship, and Institutional Continuity

The WMEES Steering Committee served as the initiative's sustained collaborative leadership and coordination structure, supporting the development, implementation, and continuity of a multi-year regional effort spanning four counties and nine convenings. Established in October 2024, the committee operated without formal officer positions or a rigid organizational hierarchy, instead drawing upon the professional expertise, institutional relationships, geographic knowledge, and community connections of its members. Its responsibilities extended beyond advising on individual events to include shaping convening priorities, identifying speakers and partners, strengthening county representation, coordinating institutional participation, mobilizing resources, supporting research and documentation, and maintaining momentum between Summits. Planning generally occurred monthly during longer-range development periods and intensified to weekly meetings as convenings approached. This required substantial behind-the-scenes coordination across organizations, municipalities, sectors, and communities, particularly as the initiative expanded its geographic reach, incorporated new research priorities, and developed toward a shared regional intelligence and advocacy framework.

The committee's leadership practices reflected the initiative's broader rhizomatic methodology; responsibility followed demonstrated engagement, relevant expertise, geographic relationships, and the needs of the work rather than permanent titles or institutional seniority. Members contributed in different capacities as the initiative evolved, with leadership shifting according to the county hosting a Summit, the subject matter under consideration, and the relationships necessary to advance particular objectives. This approach created space for meaningful participation without requiring every member to lead every workstream or attend every activity. It also established an important distinction between nominal affiliation and active stewardship, recognizing that effective distributed leadership depends upon sustained contributions, accountability, and the willingness to mobilize collective resources. Members could step forward, reduce their involvement, and reengage as their capacity and the initiative's priorities changed. Across three years, this model supported institutional continuity without concentrating ownership in a single organization or individual, demonstrating how collaborative regional infrastructure can be sustained through shared responsibility, reciprocal relationships, and coordinated action.

WMEES STEERING COMMITTEE

Tiffany Allecia, M.Ed.	Executive Director, Springfield Creative City Collective
Lydia Berry	Community Engagement Coordinator, ReVision Energy
Bill Cole	Founder and President, Living Local 413
Hope Ross Gibaldi, MBA	Program Director for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Williams College, '68 Center for Career Exploration, former Valley Venture Mentors Executive Director
Dr. Benjamin Lamb	Vice President of Economic Development, 1Berkshire
Alex LaValley	Economic Development Associate, 1Berkshire
Roberto Nieves	Director of Outreach and Communications, Common Capital
Kevin Pink	Deputy Director of Economic Development, 1Berkshire
Fungai Tichawangana	Founder and CEO, Artist Dynamix
Jenny Wright	Executive Director, North Adams Partnership

HONORARY WMEES STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Joshua Croke	Founder, Action! by Design; former Transformative Development Initiative Fellow, MassDevelopment
Xiomara Albán DeLobato	Former Vice President and Chief of Staff, Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council
Ted Harvey	Senior Planner, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
Hannah Rechtschaffen	Executive Director, Greenfield Business Association
Stephen Warley	Advancement Partner, North Adams Partnership

The Steering Committee's experience also revealed several transferable principles for developing and sustaining collaborative regional initiatives. Research-informed planning strengthened the relevance of programming, while relationships established the trust and institutional access necessary to mobilize participation and resources. Geographic reciprocity required intentional attention to whose knowledge informed decisions, where activities occurred, and how leadership opportunities were distributed across counties. Clear expectations for participation and contribution reinforced accountability within a flexible leadership structure. Equally important was the willingness to surface disagreements concerning regional identity, institutional jurisdiction, travel, administrative burden, and organizational capacity. Addressing these conditions openly supported a more responsive approach to collaboration and strengthened the committee's ability to

navigate differences without compromising shared objectives. **These practices demonstrated that distributed leadership requires intentional coordination, reciprocal investment, and the institutional discipline necessary to translate collective participation into sustained action.**

The committee's rhizomatic structure expanded the knowledge, relationships, and perspectives informing WMEES while enabling leadership to respond to changing geographic and sector-specific needs. Its experience also underscored the importance of **resourced stewardship, institutional memory, and succession planning** within distributed networks. The flexibility that allowed members to contribute according to their expertise and capacity depended upon consistent documentation, communication, coordination, and administrative support. As Springfield Creative City Collective approached its planned closure, preserving the relationships, research, institutional knowledge, and collaborative practices developed through WMEES became an essential consideration for the initiative's long-term continuity. This transition highlighted the need to establish clear responsibilities for knowledge preservation, shared resources, and future coordination before the originating organization concludes its work. **The enduring value of the Steering Committee lies in the regional civic infrastructure it helped cultivate: a network of relationships, shared knowledge, reciprocal responsibilities, and collaborative practices capable of supporting collective action beyond the lifespan of its original convener.**

Primary Data and Qualitative Evidence

The WMEES evidence base reflects three years of iterative, community-informed research conducted across Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden Counties between 2023 and 2026. Initial ecosystem mapping, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, and two foundational surveys established an early understanding of the region's entrepreneurial environment, institutional relationships, and economic-development challenges. The 2023 Western Massachusetts Business Ecosystem Survey (45 respondents) gathered perspectives from entrepreneurs and business owners in Springfield, Easthampton, Amherst, Northampton, and other communities, examining business development stages, industries, formal registration, geographic markets, access to capital and technology, business conditions, barriers to growth, support needs, and information sources. A complementary 2023 stakeholder survey (22 respondents) examined the organizations serving the regional ecosystem, including their constituencies, service capacities, collaborative relationships, referral practices, institutional barriers, and interest in developing stronger networks of coordinated support.

These foundational datasets were supplemented by a growing body of qualitative evidence generated through the regional convenings, steering committee deliberations, participant observation, facilitated discussions, registration responses, event documentation, organizational communications, and post-convening reflections. As the Summit expanded geographically and thematically, each gathering introduced additional perspectives while creating opportunities to revisit earlier observations, compare conditions across counties, and examine the persistence of previously identified challenges. This cumulative process made it possible to consider not only what

stakeholders identified as regional priorities, but also how those priorities intersected with municipal governance, institutional capacity, public investment, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, cultural development, and regional coordination. The resulting evidence informed the report's seven cross-cutting findings, five regional advocacy priorities, and Regional Intelligence Framework, transforming successive cycles of stakeholder engagement into a structured record of regional needs, institutional relationships, implementation barriers, and opportunities for collective action. The research is presented as a qualitative, longitudinal account of participating stakeholders' experiences and institutional observations, rather than a statistically representative assessment of the region's population.







Limitations

This report is not a representative public-opinion survey of all Western Massachusetts residents or businesses. Summit participation was self-selected, county participation varied by event, attendance changed over time, and some historical records are more complete than others. Many findings are qualitative. Relationships observed after convenings may reflect contribution rather than direct causation. External reports also use different geographies, time periods, samples, and methods. For these reasons, the report distinguishes recurring evidence from causal claims and treats county differences as analytically important rather than as noise.

CHAPTER 3

Literature and Regional Strategy Review



Complementary Research and Triangulation

The Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Report situates three years of WMEES stakeholder intelligence within a substantial body of independent research, institutional records, public policy, and regional planning literature. This complementary evidence spans approximately three decades and encompasses economic development, entrepreneurship, housing, infrastructure, municipal capacity, workforce development, rural policy, clean energy, cultural economies, institutional collaboration, quality of life, and public investment. Rather than treating external publications as the source of WMEES findings, the research process employed triangulation to examine where independently developed evidence reinforced, complicated, or challenged the conditions identified through regional convenings. The central analytical question was not whether every institution used identical terminology or arrived at the same recommendations, but whether distinct research methods, geographic perspectives, and historical periods revealed recurring structural conditions across Western Massachusetts. The studies and institutional sources highlighted here represent a small selection of the broader research materials consulted throughout this initiative. Some additional publications, policy documents, regional assessments, and supporting evidence are examined in greater detail in the accompanying Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Annotated Bibliography.

Economic Development, Institutional Capacity, and Inclusive Growth

Foundational research included the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's 2009 examination of Springfield's economic revitalization, the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council's annual reports, MassEcon's regional economic positioning, and MassINC and Cambridge Econometrics' 2024 Accelerating Inclusive Growth in the Pioneer Valley. Together, these sources provided historical, institutional, and economic perspectives on the region's assets, competitive advantages, collaborative infrastructure, and unrealized development potential. MassINC's

subsequent analysis of place-based investment further informed the distinction between identifying economic opportunity and establishing the financial, organizational, and implementation capacity necessary to realize it. This body of research helped contextualize a central WMEES observation: Western Massachusetts possesses substantial institutional and economic assets, yet their existence does not necessarily translate into accessible, coordinated, or durable outcomes for communities.







Housing, Infrastructure, and Differentiated Regional Conditions

The 2025 UMass Donahue Institute and Way Finders Building Homes, Building Futures study, alongside Massachusetts Housing Partnership's four-county development-opportunity research and accompanying fieldwork, provided critical evidence connecting housing supply, affordability, workforce availability, demographic change, municipal capacity, and regional competitiveness. The Massachusetts State Auditor's 2021 examination of Western Massachusetts public infrastructure added a complementary assessment of transportation assets, municipal resources, funding formulas, administrative requirements, and the practical barriers communities encounter when pursuing public investment. The Massachusetts Rural Policy Plan further demonstrated why development strategies cannot assume equivalent conditions across urban centers, Gateway Cities, small municipalities, and rural communities. Read together, these studies reinforced the importance of distinguishing formal resource availability from actual accessibility, while recognizing that equitable regional development may require different interventions across communities with substantially different capacities and circumstances.

Entrepreneurship, Capital Access, and the Persistence of Barriers

The 2013 UMass Donahue Institute Pioneer Valley Growth Business Study established an important historical reference point for examining business development, financing, technical assistance, workforce challenges, and entrepreneurial networks. Its findings were considered alongside WMEES's 2023 business and stakeholder surveys, the institutional experience of Valley Venture Mentors, and The Sphere's 2026 Breaking Barriers research. These sources provided opportunities to examine how entrepreneurs experience the regional support ecosystem across different periods and research settings. Their comparative value extended beyond identifying familiar obstacles: they helped frame questions about whether recurring challenges reflect

insufficient resources, fragmented service delivery, limited access to established networks, administrative complexity, or gaps between available assistance and the ability to navigate it. This longitudinal perspective informed the report's treatment of Recommendation Persistence as a condition requiring investigation rather than automatic evidence of institutional failure.

Climate, Clean Energy, Workforce, and Implementation Readiness

The research also traced the relationship between environmental policy and economic opportunity through the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources' 2008 renewable-energy assessment, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission's 2014 climate action and clean-energy plan, and the Commonwealth's Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2025 and 2030. These sources established that clean-energy development has long been connected to infrastructure, financing, permitting, municipal coordination, workforce preparation, and regional investment. Their historical progression provided a basis for examining how identified technical potential becomes funded, permitted, implemented, and locally beneficial economic activity. This analysis also informed the interpretation of WMEES discussions concerning energy, manufacturing, workforce development, and regional infrastructure, emphasizing that emerging industries require coordinated implementation systems rather than isolated investment commitments.

Creative Economies, Cultural Infrastructure, and Place-Based Development

Given the initiative's origins within Springfield Creative City Collective, particular attention was given to research demonstrating the economic significance of arts, culture, creativity, and place. The Barr Foundation's Creative Potential, the Massachusetts Cultural Policy Development Advisory Council's 2026 report, historical Commonwealth creative-economy policy, and the Western Massachusetts Arts Alliance Council's Regional Perspectives research provided complementary perspectives on cultural participation, creative-sector development, workforce opportunity, regional identity, and institutional access. MassDevelopment's Transformative Development Initiative contributed an additional place-based implementation framework, illustrating the importance of aligning local knowledge, technical assistance, partnerships, and investment. Together, these sources supported the report's treatment of cultural and creative activity as interconnected components of regional economic infrastructure rather than peripheral amenities or isolated sectors.

Historical Foundations of Quality of Life, Cultural Vitality, and Regional Equity

Earlier MassINC research provided an essential historical foundation for examining the relationship between economic performance, community well-being, cultural vitality, and the geographic distribution of opportunity. Its 1996 The State of the American Dream in New England documented changing family incomes, economic inequality, labor-market conditions, and growing pressures confronting working- and middle-class households. The 1998 The Road Ahead: Emerging Threats to Workers, Families and the Massachusetts Economy further challenged the assumption that strong statewide economic performance necessarily translated into improved living standards, examining how household expenses and economic insecurity could undermine the benefits of income growth.

Together, these studies established an early distinction between aggregate economic indicators and the material circumstances experienced by residents, providing historical context for WMEES's examination of regional equity, economic sustainability, and the Asset-to-Outcome Gap.

MassINC's The Pursuit of Happiness: A Survey on the Quality of Life in Massachusetts, published in the early 2000s, expanded this inquiry by examining how residents understood quality of life through the interconnected experiences of employment, household finances, education, housing, health care, public safety, community institutions, and confidence in the future. Based on a statewide survey of approximately 1,000 respondents, the research revealed an important distinction between general satisfaction and the presence of substantial unmet needs. Although 71% of Massachusetts respondents rated the Commonwealth's quality of life as good to excellent, 82% believed conditions had either remained unchanged or deteriorated during the preceding five years. Housing affordability, transportation, health care, higher education costs, and taxation emerged as major concerns. These findings challenged the assumption that broadly positive perceptions of a place necessarily indicate equitable access to opportunity or the absence of structural barriers.

The study's regional findings are especially significant for WMEES. Western Massachusetts, defined as Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden Counties, registered the highest proportion of respondents rating the state's quality of life as fair or poor, at 39%. Nearly half identified the availability of good-paying employment as an area requiring major improvement (47%), while 50% identified the health care system and 46% identified college affordability as major concerns. Financial insecurity was particularly pronounced as 40% of Western Massachusetts respondents identified finances as their family's greatest problem, and 42% reported that maintaining their standard of living had become more difficult over the preceding five years. Approximately one-third indicated that they would leave Massachusetts if given the opportunity. These historical findings documented a geographically distinct experience of economic insecurity and constrained opportunity, demonstrating that statewide measures of satisfaction could obscure substantial regional differences.

The survey also introduced an important methodological consideration for the WMEES Regional Intelligence Framework, specifically, quality of life must be understood through residents' experiences as well as institutional and economic indicators. Employment growth, public investment, housing production, and institutional assets are important measures of regional development, but they do not independently establish whether residents can afford to remain in their communities, access meaningful employment, obtain necessary services, or participate fully in civic and cultural life. This distinction is particularly relevant to WMEES's examination of the relationship between regional assets and community outcomes. It also underscores the importance of incorporating geographically differentiated evidence and community perspectives into economic-development planning rather than relying exclusively on statewide averages or institutional assessments.

MassINC and the Brookings Institution's 2007 Reconnecting Massachusetts Gateway Cities: Lessons Learned and an Agenda for Renewal extended this historical analysis by examining the unequal distribution of economic opportunity between Greater Boston and the Commonwealth's historically industrial cities, including Springfield, Holyoke, and Pittsfield. The report identified underutilized physical, human, and economic assets while emphasizing housing affordability, public services, quality of life, regional connectivity, and coordinated state and municipal action as important elements of urban renewal. Its attention to the everyday conditions that influence whether residents and businesses remain, invest, and participate in communities offered an important foundation for understanding quality of place as a dimension of economic competitiveness and regional sustainability. Read alongside subsequent creative-economy research, these findings also helped situate cultural vitality, community identity, public spaces, and locally rooted institutions within a broader place-based development framework. The report's attention to municipal fragmentation and collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries provided an additional historical precedent for WMEES's four-county approach.

Taken together, these publications establish a research trajectory extending from household economic security and labor-market inequality to resident-defined quality of life, geographic disparities, and place-based economic revitalization. Their collective significance lies not simply in demonstrating that many contemporary concerns have historical precedents, but in documenting how residents' experiences and institutional research have repeatedly identified conditions requiring coordinated public and private responses. Within the WMEES analytical framework, this history informs the Need-to-Recognition Gap, understood as the potential disconnect between documented community needs and the degree to which those needs are acknowledged, prioritized, and translated into institutional action. It also provides a foundation for examining Recommendation Persistence, the Appropriation-to-Impact Gap, and Research-to-Accountability: whether longstanding findings have informed policy commitments, whether those commitments have produced sustained implementation, and whether resulting investments have generated measurable improvements in community well-being.

Importantly, the historical recurrence of similar concerns does not, on its own, establish institutional neglect or prove that previous interventions were unsuccessful. Research methods, economic conditions, populations, and policy environments have changed substantially across the periods examined. Nevertheless, the continued relevance of these earlier studies provides a compelling rationale for investigating the relationship between research production, institutional recognition, public investment, implementation capacity, and resident-level outcomes. For WMEES, the central question is not merely how long a regional challenge has been documented, but what has happened between its recognition and its resolution; and how regional institutions can become more accountable for that process.

Historical Comparison, Structural Persistence, and Research-to-Accountability

An especially important dimension of the analysis involved comparing contemporary findings with earlier planning and policy documents, including Springfield's 2010–2014 Consolidated Plan, the 1996 and 1998 MassINC studies, the early-2000s quality-of-life survey, the 2007 Gateway Cities research, the 2009 Federal Reserve study, the 2013 business-development research, and historical infrastructure and climate strategies. These comparisons made it possible to ask whether priorities identified years earlier had been resolved, transformed, partially implemented, or continued under different institutional language. The recurrence of similar recommendations across time and organizations was not interpreted as proof that previous interventions failed. Instead, it raised more precise questions concerning implementation scale, funding continuity, institutional ownership, changing conditions, administrative accessibility, and the distinction between policy commitments and measurable outcomes. This approach helped establish the report's emphasis on tracking public investment beyond announcements and appropriations toward expenditure, implementation, and resident-level impact.

Collectively, this research provided a foundation for examining WMEES observations against historical evidence, contemporary quantitative analysis, institutional documentation, policy commitments, and independent stakeholder research. The resulting synthesis informed the report's seven cross-cutting findings, five regional advocacy priorities, and Regional Intelligence Framework. Importantly, the analysis preserved differences in research design, geographic coverage, institutional purpose, and evidentiary strength. Agreement among sources was treated as grounds for further examination, not proof of causation or uniform regional experience. By connecting the region's accumulated research with three years of participatory learning, WMEES sought to move beyond repeatedly documenting familiar challenges toward a more actionable understanding of what has been recognized, what has been recommended, what has been implemented, what remains unresolved, and what forms of shared responsibility are necessary to advance equitable regional outcomes..

CHAPTER 4

Four-County Regional Integration: Geography, Identity, and Institutional Alignment



The future of Western Massachusetts depends on the collective capacity of its four counties to navigate differences, leverage complementary assets, and advance shared economic priorities while preserving the identities that distinguish them. This central challenge shaped the evolution of the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit from a Springfield-based convening into a four-county initiative. Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden Counties share important economic, environmental, cultural, and infrastructural relationships, yet each operates within distinct planning environments and institutional ecosystems. Their development priorities, demographic conditions, political relationships, organizational networks, and historical experiences influence how resources are accessed, decisions are made, and regional opportunities are understood.

The initiative's expansion raised a central question: **How can Western Massachusetts establish the institutional alignment necessary to advance shared priorities while respecting the identities, existing strategies, and relationships that give its communities strength?** WMEES approached this question through successive county convenings, relationship-building, comparative observation, and the gradual development of a regional intelligence and advocacy framework. The initiative examined intersections among established strategies, recurring implementation challenges, and opportunities to strengthen organizational connections and collective capacity.





Alignment with Berkshire and Franklin County Strategies

Western Massachusetts possesses a substantial foundation of regional planning and economic development strategy. The *Berkshire Blueprint 2.0* and the *2023–2027 Berkshire County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy* (CEDS) demonstrate the depth of existing strategic work within Berkshire County. The Berkshire CEDS incorporates previous regional planning and organizes economic resilience around interconnected considerations of people, communities, and the economy. Franklin County's *2025–2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy*, developed through the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, similarly establishes a locally grounded framework addressing demographic change, workforce development, business conditions, infrastructure, and population retention. These documents reflect considerable institutional investment in identifying county-level economic priorities, development opportunities, and implementation needs.

These established strategies provide an important foundation for regional collaboration. **Four-county alignment should connect, reinforce, and increase the implementation capacity of existing strategies while avoiding unnecessary duplication of planning efforts.** A shared regional agenda must recognize where county priorities converge and preserve the flexibility necessary to respond to different local conditions. Housing, workforce development, transportation, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, and cultural investment may appear across multiple county strategies, yet the barriers, institutional resources, and implementation pathways associated with those priorities vary considerably.

Berkshire participation was particularly important to the credibility and development of the four-county initiative. Its involvement expanded geographic representation and introduced additional conditions against which assumptions originating in Springfield or the Pioneer Valley could be examined. Berkshire County's geographic separation, transportation conditions, institutional networks, and economic relationships require attention to distinct forms of connectivity and collaboration. Similarly, Franklin County's rural municipalities, dispersed populations, and evolving regional development priorities illustrate the limitations of applying strategies developed around larger employment centers or concentrated institutional networks across the entirety of Western Massachusetts.

The resulting lesson emphasized **regional coherence through recognition of interdependence across distinct priorities.** A housing challenge in one county may intersect with workforce recruitment in another; transportation limitations may affect access to employment, education, health care, and cultural participation across municipal boundaries; and investments in creative economies, energy, or entrepreneurship may depend on partnerships extending beyond the jurisdiction in which a project is located. WMEES consequently focused on identifying shared implementation needs, strengthening relationships among existing institutions, and developing a coordinated approach to regional advocacy and accountability that complements established county strategies.







Regional Identity, Belonging, and Institutional Relationships

Western Massachusetts contains multiple overlapping geographic, cultural, and institutional identities. The Berkshires, the Pioneer Valley, Franklin County, individual municipalities, Gateway Cities, rural communities, and college communities each carry distinct histories, associations, and understandings of place. These identities influence how communities describe themselves, organize economic development efforts, attract investment, and establish relationships with state government and neighboring regions. Regional designations shape institutional priorities, public perceptions, access to networks, and the degree to which residents and organizations identify with broader collaborative initiatives.

The distinction between the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley is particularly relevant. Although both are commonly situated within Western Massachusetts, they have developed recognizable regional identities, institutional networks, and economic development narratives that do not always align neatly. The Pioneer Valley designation encompasses considerable diversity across Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin Counties, while the Berkshires maintain a distinct regional identity associated with their communities, geography, cultural institutions, and economic development structures. Franklin County's efforts to strengthen its individual identity and articulate locally grounded development priorities further illustrate how county-level identity can coexist with participation in a larger regional ecosystem.

These identities represent valuable regional assets, providing communities with established relationships, recognizable narratives, and a sense of ownership over local development. Tensions may nevertheless emerge when regional terminology, convening locations, institutional influence, or access to funding and decision-making create perceptions that one geography occupies the center while others participate from the periphery. WMEES sought to establish collaborative structures that recognized the legitimacy of multiple regional identities and supported their contributions to shared priorities.

Regional integration depends on relationships, shared practices, and institutional connections that enable distinct communities to act collectively while maintaining their geographic and cultural identities. This understanding positions regional diversity as a foundation for collaboration and recognizes that institutional alignment can develop across communities with different priorities, histories, and relationships to place.

Institutional relationships also carry history. Organizations and communities may have prior experiences with planning processes, resource distribution, statewide engagement, competition for funding, or regional collaborations that influence their willingness and ability to participate in subsequent initiatives. Differences in organizational size, staffing, financial resources, political access, and administrative capacity further shape who can attend meetings, contribute information, sustain partnerships, or influence regional priorities. Meaningful geographic representation therefore requires attention to the structures through which participation occurs and the potential for existing disparities in institutional influence to persist within collaborative processes.

In this report, **healing is understood narrowly and practically**: recognizing where organizational silos, exclusion, institutional friction, or unequal access to relationships and resources have limited collaboration; clarifying roles and responsibilities; and developing the habits, agreements, and infrastructure necessary to share knowledge, relationships, resources, and opportunities across organizational and geographic boundaries. This approach acknowledges institutional history while allowing participants to establish functional relationships and shared commitments without requiring complete agreement about previous experiences.

Breaking down institutional silos is a requirement for future regional success. The complexity of Western Massachusetts' economic, demographic, infrastructural, and institutional challenges exceeds the capacity of any single organization or county to address independently. Information-sharing, relationship maintenance, coordinated advocacy, and collaborative implementation must therefore become essential functions of regional development. These capacities require deliberate practice, sustained stewardship, reciprocal commitments, and structures that support cooperation through changes in organizational leadership, staffing, funding, and institutional priorities.

This perspective reflects an important contribution from WMEES Steering Committee member Jenny Wright, Executive Director of the North Adams Partnership, who emphasized the need to strengthen regional relationships and shared responsibility through consistent, intentional collaboration. Her feedback highlighted the importance of building institutional capacity across

organizational and geographic boundaries, particularly where established silos or fragmented relationships have constrained collective action. In this framework, **collaboration functions as a form of regional infrastructure that requires ongoing investment, maintenance, and active participation to remain effective.** The ability to share information, coordinate resources, and work across institutional boundaries must be cultivated as an enduring organizational practice.

The connection to **Human Sustainability** is significant. Durable regional collaboration depends on institutional agreements, shared strategic objectives, and the human capacity required to sustain participation. When organizations must repeatedly rebuild relationships, locate information, navigate unclear responsibilities, or overcome geographic and institutional barriers without adequate support, the costs of collaboration are transferred to individuals and already-constrained organizations. A sustainable model distributes responsibility, preserves institutional knowledge, makes participation accessible, and establishes a culture of shared ownership in which disagreement, geographic difference, and institutional history can be navigated without making cooperation unnecessarily burdensome.

The practical measure of successful regional integration lies in the capacity of organizations to exchange information, coordinate decisions, mobilize resources, identify complementary responsibilities, and advance priorities that would otherwise remain fragmented. **Collaboration becomes meaningful when it changes what institutions are capable of accomplishing together.** This provides a basis for evaluating regional partnerships through their sustained practices, implementation capacity, and collective outcomes.

Historical accounts of Berkshire political identity, including Revolutionary-era conflicts over governance and representation, offer additional context for understanding the longstanding importance of local authority and geographic belonging. These accounts provide historical perspective on questions of representation, autonomy, and regional affiliation without establishing direct causation for contemporary institutional dynamics. Contemporary regional integration must remain grounded in present-day institutional evidence and stakeholder experience while recognizing the historical depth of relationships between place, identity, and governance.

CHAPTER 5

Summit-by-Summit Record: Programs, Leadership, and the Development of Regional Intelligence



Foundational Ecosystem Mapping — Springfield | April 12, 2023

The April 12, 2023, *Western Mass Ecosystem Mapping Listening Session*, held at Valley Venture Mentors in Springfield, established the participatory research foundation for the subsequent Summit series. Valley Venture Mentors, Springfield Creative City Collective, and the National League of Cities supported the convening, which brought entrepreneurs and small-business owners into structured discussion with capital providers, technical-assistance organizations, legal and financial professionals, community representatives, and public-sector stakeholders.

The program employed design thinking and a SWOT analysis to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats affecting the regional entrepreneurship ecosystem. **Unstoppable Latina and The Tatted Professionals facilitated the SWOT process at Valley Venture Mentors**, supporting separate discussions among entrepreneurs and economic-development stakeholders. Participants considered the accessibility of legal advice, financing, workforce training, technical assistance, and business-development resources. The exercises also examined institutional relationships and opportunities to improve coordination among service providers.

This early programming established a participatory method for identifying institutional assets alongside the practical experiences of those attempting to use them. The accompanying business and stakeholder surveys subsequently provided a baseline for examining resource accessibility, referral systems, institutional fragmentation, and regional economic opportunity.

Summit #1 — Springfield, Hampden County | December 1, 2023

Western Mass Ecosystem Coalition Networking Retreat

The first Summit convened at the TD Bank Conference Center in Springfield and advanced the initial ecosystem-mapping work through facilitated institutional dialogue, resource identification, and collaborative planning.

The organizing network included **Valley Venture Mentors, Springfield Creative City Collective**, and participating organizations such as the **City of Springfield Office of Planning and Economic Development, Massachusetts Supplier Diversity Office, Massachusetts Small Business Development Center, Smith College's Conway Center, Lever, Boston Impact Initiative, LaunchSpace, EforAll, and Pioneer Valley Planning Commission**.

The retreat's programming addressed the structure and accessibility of the regional entrepreneurship-support ecosystem. Participants examined the relationship between available institutional services and the ability of entrepreneurs to identify, access, and navigate them. Discussion topics included capital access, technical assistance, entrepreneurial networks, organizational referrals, resource duplication, and inequities affecting participation in business development.

Facilitated discussion and collective synthesis contributed to the development of an evolving ecosystem map. The program also incorporated the *Flavors of Unity Luncheon*, which connected the convening to Springfield's local food entrepreneurs and recognized community-based businesses within the regional economic-development conversation.

Following the retreat, **Hope Ross Gibaldi, then Executive Director of Valley Venture Mentors**, circulated a December 18 communication outlining continued ecosystem-map development, participant engagement, research, and future quarterly gatherings. This established a documented process for maintaining continuity between convenings.







Summit #2 — Springfield, Hampden County | April 5, 2024

Western Mass Ecosystem Coalition Networking Event

The April 2024 gathering continued the institutional coordination and relationship-building process initiated in December. Programming emphasized the ongoing development of the regional ecosystem network, collective learning, and the identification of opportunities for collaborative action.

An important programmatic outcome was the decision to rotate subsequent gatherings among Western Massachusetts' four counties. This approach enabled county-based institutions to shape programming according to local economic conditions, community priorities, and established relationships.

Brianna Drohen, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of LaunchSpace, subsequently assumed a leading role in developing the Franklin County gathering, working with **Hope Ross Gibaldi, Valley Venture Mentors, Springfield Creative City Collective**, and additional regional partners.

The April convening therefore contributed to the emergence of a distributed organizing model in which geographic leadership and institutional responsibility could shift across the regional network.







Summit #3 — Orange, Franklin County | June 7, 2024

Western MA Entrepreneur Ecosystem Gathering: Rural Entrepreneurship, Institutional Responsiveness, and Shared Resources

The June 7 gathering took place at **LaunchSpace Makerspace** in Orange, with local organizing leadership from **Brianna Drohen and LaunchSpace**, in collaboration with **Hope Ross Gibaldi and Valley Venture Mentors** and Springfield Creative City Collective.

The program's central purpose was to examine regional entrepreneurship support through the conditions experienced by Franklin County communities and rural economic-development stakeholders. Its published framing identified geographic distance, systemic racism, inequitable resource distribution, limited large-industry presence, and technological infrastructure as significant issues affecting the regional ecosystem.

The event included a networking luncheon, welcoming remarks, breakout discussion sessions, a large-group share-out, and closing reflections. The breakout discussions addressed three guiding questions: the resources available to entrepreneurs and economic-development organizations; the responsiveness and adaptability of existing programs; and opportunities to align regional resources, coalitions, and initiatives.

A rural-policy discussion incorporated **State Senator Jo Comerford** and the proposed Rural Communities designation. The conversation connected local entrepreneurship and municipal development to statewide policy discussions concerning rural-specific funding mechanisms, agricultural investment, water and sewer infrastructure, redevelopment of vacant mill properties, and economic-development incentives.

The June gathering also intersected with advocacy by the **Rural Policy Advisory Commission** and Massachusetts legislators concerning H.4459, *An Act relative to strengthening Massachusetts' economic leadership*. These policy developments provided a legislative context for the regional discussion.

The Orange program contributed a distinct rural perspective to WMEES and established county-based hosting as a practical method for incorporating geographically differentiated economic conditions into the regional record.

Summit #4 — Pittsfield, Berkshire County | September 6, 2024

Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit: Cross-County Innovation and Economic Opportunity Mapping

The fourth Summit convened at the **Berkshire Innovation Center** in Pittsfield, with organizing participation from **1Berkshire, Berkshire Innovation Center, Massachusetts Founders Network, and Valley Venture Mentors**. Springfield Creative City Collective supported the gathering as a sponsor.

The program included two significant components: the panel **"Fostering a Cross-County Innovation Collaborative"** and the facilitated exercise **"Economic Opportunity Mapping: Foundations, Bridges & Chasms."**

The innovation panel was moderated by **Ben Sosne of the Berkshire Innovation Center** and featured **Pittsfield Mayor Peter Marchetti, Holyoke Mayor Joshua Garcia, and Karen Carswell of MassDevelopment**. The discussion brought municipal and statewide economic-development perspectives into a shared examination of regional innovation, investment, institutional coordination, and cross-county economic relationships.

The panel's composition connected the experience of a Berkshire municipality, a Hampden County Gateway City, and a statewide development institution. This created an opportunity to consider how local economic-development priorities interact with regional innovation infrastructure and

state investment systems.

The opportunity-mapping exercise was facilitated by **Dr. Benjamin Lamb, Vice President of Economic Development at 1Berkshire**. Its *Foundations, Bridges & Chasms* framework invited participants to identify regional economic assets, examine existing connections among institutions, and consider gaps affecting collaboration and access to opportunity.

The program also incorporated resource mapping and information collection intended to strengthen the developing four-county ecosystem record.

State Senator Paul Mark was identified in the event programming, bringing a legislative perspective to the Berkshire convening.

The Pittsfield Summit marked the formal adoption of the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit name and contributed to the development of the WMEES Steering Committee, established in October 2024.









Summit #5 — Hadley, Hampshire County | December 6, 2024

Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit: Municipal Leadership, Legislative Relationships, and Regional Identity

The fifth Summit took place at **Venture Way Collaborative** in Hadley, completing the initiative's initial convening circuit across all four Western Massachusetts counties.

The program incorporated a **Hampshire County Mayoral and Town Management Panel** featuring **Northampton Mayor Gina-Louise Sciarra, Easthampton Mayor Nicole LaChapelle, and South Hadley Town Administrator Lisa Wong**.

The panel addressed local economic-development challenges and accomplishments, regional initiatives, intermunicipal collaboration, and the future economic outlook for Hampshire County. The participation of two mayors and a town administrator brought different municipal governance structures into the conversation and supported comparative consideration of economic-development responsibilities, administrative capacity, and local implementation conditions.

The **Legislative Luncheon** convened state and municipal representatives to strengthen the relationships supporting regional economic development. Its documented participants included **State Representatives Shirley Arriaga, Carlos Gonzalez, and Bud Williams; Northampton City Councilor Marissa Elkins; Springfield City Councilor Jose Delgado; Belchertown Select Board Member Jennifer Turner; South Hadley Select Board Member Renee Sweeney; Belchertown Select Board Vice Chair Lisa Lessard Pearson; Amherst Town Councilor Ellisha Walker; and Holyoke City Council President Tessa Murphy-Romboletti**.

The luncheon also introduced the **Western Massachusetts Identity Development Initiative**, connecting questions of regional identity and public representation to economic opportunity, collaborative growth, and relationships among municipalities and institutions.

Program leadership and organizational participation included **Tiffany Allecia of Springfield Creative City Collective; Xiomara Albán DeLobato of the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council; Hope Ross Gibaldi of Valley Venture Mentors; and Joshua Croke of Action! by Design**, among other partners.

The Hampshire County gathering contributed to WMEES's examination of municipal leadership, legislative coordination, institutional relationships, and the practical conditions necessary for sustained regional collaboration.







Summit #6 — Greenfield, Franklin County | April 4, 2025

Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit: Municipal Administration, Regional Identity, and Collaborative Economic Development

The sixth Summit returned to Franklin County and convened at the **Greenfield Public Library**. Its programming examined local economic-development conditions, regional initiatives, institutional coordination, and the responsibilities of municipal and regional organizations.

The **Franklin County Mayoral and Town Management Panel** featured **Greenfield Mayor Virginia "Ginny" Desorgher and Montague Town Administrator Walter Ramsey**.

The panel focused on local economic-development challenges and successes, cross-county collaboration, regional initiatives, and Franklin County's economic outlook. The participation of Greenfield and Montague leadership provided perspectives from communities operating under different municipal governance arrangements and administrative conditions.

Additional documented contributors included **Jessica Atwood of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments; John Waite, Executive Director of the Franklin County Community Development Corporation; Hannah Rechtschaffen of the Greenfield Business Association; and Jacob Robinson, Executive Director of the Amherst Area Chamber of Commerce**.

These participants brought regional planning, community development, business advocacy, and institutional coordination perspectives into the program. Their collective areas of expertise supported examination of municipal economic-development capacity, entrepreneurship resources, local business conditions, and opportunities for collaboration across communities.

The event's stated focus areas included **federal impact strategic planning, enhanced regional identity, a collaborative roadmap, and actionable insights and ideas**.

The return to Franklin County enabled WMEES to examine local governance and institutional coordination within an evolving regional policy environment.







Summit #7 — Adams, Berkshire County | October 3, 2025

Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit: Cultural Economies, Regional Planning, and Place-Based Development

The seventh Summit took place at **The Adams Theater**, connecting the region's economic-development discussion to arts, culture, creative enterprise, and place-based revitalization.

A featured panel, **"Driving Economic Growth Through Culture and Creativity,"** included **Kristy Edmunds of MASS MoCA, John Lewis of R3SET Enterprises and The Blackshires Foundation, and Diane Pearlman of the Berkshire Film and Media Collaborative**.

The panel brought together perspectives from a major contemporary arts institution, community-centered cultural and economic initiatives, and the film and media sector. Its subject matter connected cultural infrastructure, creative enterprise, regional identity, community development, and the economic contributions of arts-based activity.

A complementary research and planning discussion involved the **Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, Franklin Regional Council of Governments, and UMass Donahue Institute**. This component placed regional planning and research perspectives in conversation with the Summit's broader economic-development priorities.

Supporting organizations identified in the event record included **Springfield Creative City Collective, Valley Venture Mentors, Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council, Artist Dynamix, Inc413, ReVision Energy, Living Local 413, 413 Online, Williams College's '68 Center for Career Exploration, 1Berkshire, North Adams Partnership, Discover North Adams, MassDevelopment's Transformative Development Initiative, and the Barr Foundation**.

The Adams gathering contributed to the integration of cultural economies and community identity within WMEES's regional economic-development analysis. Its programming provided a foundation for examining cultural institutions, creative workers, and place-based investment as interconnected elements of regional economic capacity.











Summit #8 — Holyoke, Hampden County | May 15, 2026

Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit: Clean Energy, Manufacturing, Food Systems, and Regional Readiness

The eighth Summit convened at the **Massachusetts Green High Performance Computing Center** in Holyoke and incorporated programming addressing emerging industries, regional infrastructure, and economic-development readiness.

Featured institutional contributors included the **Massachusetts Clean Energy Center, Massachusetts Center for Advanced Manufacturing at MassTech, Massachusetts Food System Collaborative, UMass Dartmouth, South Coast Regional Prosperity Collaborative, and Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council**.

The program connected several economic-development domains: clean-energy investment and deployment; advanced manufacturing and industrial capacity; food-system development; public health; environmental justice; innovation; and the institutional coordination necessary to advance emerging economic opportunities.

The inclusion of the **South Coast Regional Prosperity Collaborative** and **UMass Dartmouth** introduced an interregional perspective, creating opportunities to consider Western Massachusetts' development conditions alongside the experience of another Massachusetts region.

Paul St. Pierre, Regional Director for Western Massachusetts at the Massachusetts Office of Business Development, was also identified within the program record.

ReVision Energy and IronRidge, an Enstall company, supported the event as Premier Sponsors. IronRidge's manufacturing presence in Westfield connected the clean-energy discussion to regional manufacturing and industrial development.

The Holyoke Summit expanded the longitudinal record into emerging economic sectors and strengthened the connection between regional assets, statewide development priorities, institutional implementation capacity, and economic opportunity.










Summit #9 — Florence, Hampshire County | October 23, 2026

Ninth and Final Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit: Regional Intelligence, Research, Advocacy, and Stewardship

The ninth and final Summit under Springfield Creative City Collective's leadership was scheduled for October 23, 2026, at **BOMBYX Center for Arts & Equity** in Florence.

The program was organized around the publication of the **Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Report**, the presentation of independent regional research, the development of the **Western Massachusetts Regional Advocacy Platform**, and the stewardship of the relationships and knowledge established throughout the initiative.

The **"Breaking Barriers" Research Presentation** featured research from **The Sphere Northampton**, developed in partnership with **Liberty Bank and Common Capital**. The presentation materials identified **Dr. Megan Allen, Co-Founder and Chief of Momentum at The Sphere and owner of Community Classroom, and Dawn Creighton, Senior Advisor and Community Outreach Officer at Liberty Bank**, as presenters.

The research examined entrepreneurship, access to capital, and the experiences of individuals navigating business-support institutions. Its inclusion provided an independent body of evidence for comparison with WMEES's earlier entrepreneurship and stakeholder research.

The **Western Massachusetts Arts Advocacy Coalition's "Regional Perspectives"** presentation and panel addressed cultural participation, creative-economy conditions, regional arts infrastructure, and the implications of arts and culture for economic-development policy. The planning program identified the panel's institutional purpose while leaving its complete moderator and participant roster pending confirmation.

The Regional Intelligence Report presentation was organized into five substantive components: **Origins and Methodology; Summit Record and Findings; Regional Advocacy Platform; Regional Intelligence Framework; and Regional Stewardship and Next Steps**.

These components addressed the initiative's original ecosystem-mapping research, its expansion into a four-county longitudinal process, recurring regional economic-development conditions, shared advocacy priorities, implementation barriers, administrative accessibility, and the preservation of regional knowledge.

The program also included **"One Region, Distinct Strengths,"** a regional leadership conversation featuring **Dr. Benjamin Lamb of 1Berkshire and Aaron Vega of the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council**. The conversation was designed to address shared regional priorities while recognizing the distinct economic conditions, identities, institutional capacities, and development strategies of Western Massachusetts' four counties.

Featured acknowledgments and remarks identified **State Senator Adam Gomez**, Executive Sponsor of the final Summit; **Anabelle Rondon of MassDevelopment's Transformative Development Initiative**; **Xiomara Albán DeLobato**, recognized for her contributions to regional leadership and WMEES; and **Jesse Lederman, Regional Director in the Office of U.S. Senator Edward J. Markey**, scheduled to deliver remarks on the Senator's behalf.

The program acknowledged the contributions of **MassDevelopment, the Barr Foundation, Springfield Creative City Collective, Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council**, and the regional partners whose support sustained the initiative.

The culminating Summit was designed to connect three years of convening and research to a shared body of regional intelligence, a five-priority advocacy platform, and future institutional stewardship.







Historical Significance of the Summit Programming

Across the nine-Summit sequence, programming developed through recurring engagement with the region's economic conditions, institutional capacities, and community priorities. Each gathering contributed a distinct combination of geographic perspective, sector expertise, municipal leadership, research, and facilitated collaboration. The sequence began with entrepreneurship mapping and resource navigation, expanded into rural economic-development policy and cross-county innovation, incorporated municipal governance and regional identity, and subsequently addressed cultural economies, clean energy, manufacturing, food systems, and regional implementation readiness.

The participation of named institutional leaders, municipal officials, researchers, entrepreneurs, funders, and community organizations constitutes an essential component of the historical record. Their contributions demonstrate how regional knowledge was developed through recurring engagement among institutions with different responsibilities, geographic constituencies, and areas of expertise. The resulting Summit record provides a foundation for examining the continuity of regional economic-development concerns, the evolution of collaborative practices, and the relationship between institutional knowledge, shared priorities, public investment, and measurable community outcomes.

Synthesis of Regional Findings and Strategic Priorities

The longitudinal WMEES record, beginning with the 2023 entrepreneur and stakeholder surveys and extending through successive four-county convenings, identifies five interrelated domains of regional economic-development concern. These priorities reflect recurring stakeholder observations, institutional research, municipal perspectives, and sector-specific discussions. Collectively, they establish the substantive foundation for the Regional Advocacy Platform.

Economic Development, Capital, and Business Support. Entrepreneurs and institutional stakeholders consistently identified access to capital, business expansion, technical assistance, professional networks, government support, and resource navigation as central considerations. The 2023 baseline research documented barriers involving financing, collaboration, and awareness of available assistance, while stakeholder responses emphasized referral systems and stronger institutional networks. These findings indicate opportunities to improve the accessibility, coordination, and effectiveness of existing entrepreneurial infrastructure through streamlined navigation, trusted referrals, and sustained implementation support.

Infrastructure, Transportation, and Energy. Regional discussions connected transportation, broadband, utility systems, energy infrastructure, and municipal administrative capacity to economic participation and development readiness. Transportation influences workforce mobility and access to services; broadband supports education, entrepreneurship, and technological

participation; and utility capacity affects housing production, industrial investment, and clean-energy deployment. The effectiveness of infrastructure investment consequently depends upon coordinated financing, project readiness, municipal staffing, and implementation capacity.

Housing and Quality of Place. Housing availability, affordability, rehabilitation, and development feasibility emerged as interconnected determinants of workforce retention, community stability, business growth, and regional competitiveness. Development conditions vary considerably among rural municipalities, Gateway Cities, and larger employment centers. Financing structures, infrastructure requirements, construction costs, and local administrative resources influence project feasibility across these contexts. Regional housing strategies therefore require differentiated implementation mechanisms responsive to local market conditions and community development priorities.

Community, Culture, Environment, and Public Health. The Summit series incorporated cultural institutions, creative industries, food systems, recreation, environmental stewardship, public health, downtown vitality, and community identity into its examination of regional economic conditions. These assets contribute to employment, entrepreneurship, tourism, investment, population retention, and quality of life. Their significance is particularly evident across Western Massachusetts, where urban cultural institutions, rural landscapes, historic communities, and locally rooted enterprises collectively shape regional identity and economic opportunity.

Workforce, Education, and Demographic Change. Workforce development emerged as a multidimensional priority influenced by housing, childcare, transportation, compensation, educational access, employer coordination, and demographic trends. Expanding opportunities in clean energy, advanced manufacturing, technology, health care, food systems, and creative industries require accessible training pathways and stronger alignment among educational institutions, employers, and workforce-development systems. Sustainable regional growth also depends upon retaining existing residents, supporting career mobility, and attracting workers with the skills required by evolving industries.

Cross-Cutting Structural Findings

Across these five domains, the longitudinal record identifies seven recurring structural considerations:

- **Asset-to-Outcome Gap:** Western Massachusetts possesses substantial institutional, economic, cultural, and human assets, while the mechanisms connecting these resources to measurable and equitably distributed outcomes remain uneven.
- **Recommendation Persistence:** Similar development priorities recur across convenings, research initiatives, and planning periods, underscoring the importance of implementation tracking, institutional accountability, and continuity between successive recommendations.

- **Administrative Accessibility:** Formal eligibility for programs, financing, and public investment operates alongside practical requirements involving documentation, technical expertise, application processes, organizational capacity, and resource navigation.
- **Differential Regional Impact:** Statewide policies and standardized funding mechanisms interact with distinct economic, geographic, fiscal, and administrative conditions across rural communities, Gateway Cities, small towns, and regional employment centers.
- **Implementation Capacity:** Municipal staffing, predevelopment resources, institutional ownership, project readiness, and interorganizational coordination influence the conversion of strategic priorities and appropriated resources into completed initiatives.
- **Knowledge Infrastructure:** Institutional relationships, regional intermediaries, research records, referral networks, and accumulated stakeholder intelligence constitute essential infrastructure for coordination, organizational learning, and long-term economic-development effectiveness.
- **Belonging and Institutional Trust:** Community participation and resource utilization are influenced by institutional credibility, culturally responsive engagement, accessible communication, and relationships that support meaningful entry into economic-development systems.

Implications for Regional Advocacy

These findings establish a common analytical foundation for coordinated regional advocacy. Their interdependence demonstrates the importance of aligning sector-specific investments with administrative capacity, geographic accessibility, institutional relationships, and measurable community outcomes.

The Regional Advocacy Platform organizes these findings into five strategic priorities while recognizing the differentiated conditions of Western Massachusetts' four counties. Its recommendations are intended to strengthen implementation capacity, improve resource accessibility, support institutional coordination, and advance equitable economic opportunity across the region.

CHAPTER 6

Regional Advocacy Framework and Policy Priorities



The advocacy platform is the action layer of the report. It translates recurring evidence into a shared four-county agenda while preserving local flexibility. Its vision is a resilient, equitable, and prosperous Western Massachusetts powered by connected communities, innovative businesses, sustainable infrastructure, and inclusive opportunity.







Priority A. Economic Development, Capital Access & Business Support

- Strengthen capital pathways, investor readiness, technical assistance, micro-loan and incubator capacity.
- Build a durable warm-referral network across financial institutions, CDCs, state agencies, EDCs, chambers, municipalities, philanthropy, investors, and grantmakers.
- Support business resilience, succession, transition, and exit planning as the ownership base ages.
- Treat childcare and housing as business-support infrastructure.

- Adapt existing tools such as REDOs, TDI fellows, and CDC models so rural communities can compete on equitable footing.
- Advance four-county technology and innovation pathways in agriculture, quantum, clean energy, defense, circular economy, and other sectors supported by regional evidence.





Priority B. Infrastructure, Transportation & Energy

- Expand regional transit, west-east connectivity, last-mile mobility, and seasonal transportation that connects visitors and residents to major assets.
- Treat broadband and digital access as economic infrastructure.
- Upgrade grid and rural substation capacity and reduce energy-cost barriers to housing and business development.
- Continue promising pilots long enough to generate meaningful multi-year evidence before judging long-term viability.
- Pair infrastructure funding with site readiness, predevelopment, municipal staffing, and project-delivery capacity.






Priority C. Housing & Quality of Place

- Increase housing production and rehabilitation across affordable, workforce, senior, shared, and market-rate segments.

- Create predevelopment and bridge-funding tools that work at different project scales.
- Design state housing and zoning tools that recognize rural feasibility and small-project significance.
- Integrate walkability, green space, lighting, broadband, and quality-of-place principles.
- Build regional mechanisms for matching funds and coordinated housing investment.

Priority D. Community, Culture & Environment

- Treat cultural and creative infrastructure as economic infrastructure.
- Build cross-county cultural programming, collective marketing, and shared measurement of economic impact.
- Connect outdoor recreation, environmental stewardship, public health, food access, tourism, and downtown vitality.
- Support both major institutions and community-rooted creative enterprises, artists, makers, and cultural organizations.
- Develop shared regional storytelling that reflects the full four-county economy rather than a single center.







Priority E. Workforce, Education & Demographics

- Expand apprenticeships, vocational pathways, and sector-aligned training in trades, technology, health care, clean energy, manufacturing, food systems, and creative industries.
- Address housing, childcare, transportation, wages, and benefits as workforce-retention infrastructure.
- Strengthen employer-education alignment and visible career pathways for residents.
- Plan for aging populations, migration patterns, succession, and the need to attract and retain younger workers and families.

- Address Human Sustainability—including workload, organizational capacity, compensation, burnout, and professional longevity—as part of the infrastructure required to retain the people responsible for community and economic-development implementation.





Cross-Cutting Advocacy Architecture

Across all five priorities, the platform recommends stronger four-county coordination, accessible state program design, shared data and accountability, warm referrals, project-readiness support, rural inclusion, and preservation of knowledge infrastructure. A Four-County Economic Development Compact or comparable mechanism could provide a shared table for priorities that require joint advocacy without displacing the mandates of existing institutions.

CHAPTER 7

Relationships and Network Outcomes



The most important network outcomes cannot be reduced to attendance counts. Repeated convening created introductions, referrals, follow-up meetings, shared intelligence, invitations, policy alignment, sponsorship, and new institutional familiarity. Some examples are concrete: local organizations connected with municipal partners; cross-county actors encountered one another in places they did not routinely travel; state agencies and statewide initiatives entered regional conversations; private-sector sponsors participated alongside public and nonprofit stakeholders; and regional research increasingly circulated across organizational boundaries.

These outcomes should be described carefully. WMEES can credibly claim to have created conditions for connection and contributed to network development. It should not claim sole causation for collaborations that also depended on the agency, resources, and prior relationships of participating organizations. The more durable contribution is the creation of repeated opportunities for relationships to become regional infrastructure.

CHAPTER 8

The Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Framework



8.1. Framework Development and Research Methodology

The Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Framework emerged through my investigation of recurring challenges identified throughout the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit (WMEES) series. It was developed through an iterative process of examining Summit findings, regional studies, public budgets, government programs, funding announcements, implementation requirements, and institutional support systems.

A recurring question shaped this inquiry: How could regional organizations, municipalities, and community-development practitioners report persistent difficulty accessing stable resources while state institutions simultaneously announced substantial public investments?

Both observations could be accurate. Their coexistence suggested that the availability of resources and their practical accessibility required separate examination.

I began tracing the institutional processes connecting public need to government investment and community outcomes. This involved reviewing Massachusetts budget and capital-investment materials, state grant programs, technical-assistance resources, and administrative infrastructure, including the Federal Funds & Infrastructure Office, GrantWell, MassDOT Municipal Planning and Support, Small Business Technical Assistance, MassTech Collaborative, and the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

The research established that Massachusetts has developed substantial infrastructure to support municipalities, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and regional projects. This finding complicated assumptions about resource scarcity and redirected the inquiry toward questions of institutional coordination, awareness, eligibility, accessibility, implementation capacity, geographic responsiveness, and measurable impact.

As the investigation expanded, I developed a series of interconnected analytical concepts intended to explain how public needs are recognized, how resources move through institutions, and how regional conditions influence their eventual outcomes.

These concepts constitute a developing research framework rather than a validated causal model. Their purpose is to organize evidence, identify unanswered questions, distinguish among competing explanations, and support more precise regional analysis.

8.2. Public Investment Pathway and Institutional Implementation

One of the earliest findings concerned the multiple meanings assigned to public investment.

Government announcements, legislative appropriations, program authorizations, grant awards, expenditures, and completed projects are frequently discussed as though they represent the same stage of investment. In practice, they involve distinct institutional processes, timelines, responsibilities, and measures of progress.

I developed the **Public Investment Pathway** to make these distinctions visible:



The pathway provides a structure for examining where resources are situated within their administrative lifecycle. It does not assume that every investment follows an identical or strictly linear sequence.

Three related concepts emerged from this analysis.

The **Need-to-Recognition Gap** concerns the period between the emergence of an identifiable public condition and institutional recognition sufficient to generate coordinated policy action.

The **Announcement–Implementation Gap** examines the period separating a public commitment from the operational availability of its associated intervention.

The **Appropriation-to-Impact Gap** follows authorized resources through administrative implementation and the achievement of measurable outcomes.

Together, these concepts form part of the broader **Need-to-Outcome Gap**, developed through the Massachusetts literacy investigation presented later in this chapter.

These intervals do not inherently demonstrate institutional failure. Public implementation frequently requires legislation, regulation, procurement, contracting, staffing, professional training, construction, compliance, and local execution.

Their analytical value lies in making the duration, visibility, responsibility, and practical consequences of each stage subject to examination.

Implementation Capacity and Administrative Accessibility

The investigation also required distinguishing an institution's ability to implement an intervention from a stakeholder's ability to access it.

Implementation Capacity refers to the staffing, financing, expertise, partnerships, institutional ownership, project readiness, administrative systems, accountability, and continuity required to translate an authorized initiative into functioning services or infrastructure.

Administrative Accessibility refers to whether an eligible organization, municipality, business, or individual can practically discover, understand, apply for, receive, administer, and deploy an available resource.

A program may be appropriately funded and formally accessible while application requirements, matching obligations, reimbursement structures, deadlines, compliance responsibilities, staffing limitations, or cash-flow conditions constrain participation.

These barriers are especially relevant when comparing organizations and municipalities with substantially different administrative resources.

Access Cost and the Translation Gap

The pursuit of public resources carries an organizational cost that may remain largely invisible in conventional investment reporting.

Applicants may devote substantial labor to opportunity research, project development, budgeting, data collection, partnership coordination, letters of support, financial documentation, compliance review, narrative development, and executive oversight before knowing whether an award will follow.

An unsuccessful application may still generate useful planning or institutional relationships, but much of its associated labor produces no direct financial return.

I define **Access Cost** as the financial, administrative, and human resources required to pursue, secure, and maintain access to an available opportunity.

This introduced a related concept, the **Translation Gap**, which describes differences in how the same institutional activity is interpreted by administering agencies and participating stakeholders.

For example, a large number of grant applications may demonstrate substantial public interest, program visibility, or demand. The same figure also represents significant investments of applicant labor, including work undertaken by organizations that receive no award.

Both interpretations may be accurate. Application volume alone cannot establish equitable distribution, successful access, sufficient applicant capacity, or community impact.

Understanding this distinction requires examining application-to-award ratios, the geographic and organizational distribution of awards, unsuccessful applicant experiences, administrative costs, and subsequent implementation outcomes.






8.3. Organizational Capacity and Human Sustainability

The investigation identified an additional relationship between administrative systems and the individuals responsible for implementing community and economic-development work.

Organizations do not experience capacity limitations independently of the people who sustain them.

Human Sustainability examines whether practitioners can maintain financial stability, professional longevity, personal well-being, civic participation, and quality of life while fulfilling their responsibilities.

Community-development professionals may be responsible for addressing housing instability, food insecurity, educational disparities, organizational sustainability, and economic insecurity while experiencing some of these same pressures themselves.

Repeated resource pursuit can contribute to an accumulation of administrative obligations, uncertain compensation, organizational instability, and competing demands on limited personnel.

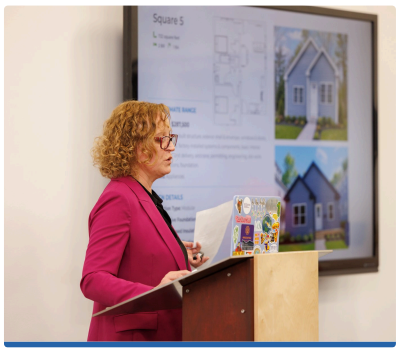
The following sequence represents a potential cycle for further investigation:

Community Need → Organizational Response → Resource Pursuit → Access Cost → Capacity Strain → Human Strain → Burnout or Departure → Knowledge Loss → Reduced Implementation Capacity → Continued Community Need

This cycle should not be interpreted as an established causal relationship between competitive funding systems and workforce departure. It identifies a plausible interaction requiring empirical examination.

Relevant evidence would include staff turnover, compensation, organizational financial stability, grant-development costs, vacancy duration, institutional knowledge transfer, and the relationship between administrative demands and program delivery.

Human Sustainability consequently becomes part of regional implementation capacity. Workforce instability may affect the continuity of programs, relationships, institutional memory, and the ability to sustain long-term interventions.







8.4. Massachusetts Literacy Investigation: Public Investment and the Need-to-Outcome Gap

Research Origins and Financial Analysis

My investigation into Massachusetts literacy policy emerged from a broader examination of public investment, resource accessibility, and the relationship between government commitments and community outcomes. I sought to understand how documented public needs translate into appropriated resources, operational programs, and measurable improvements in the communities those investments are intended to serve.

Using **Massachusetts Budget Digital**, I examined the Commonwealth's Early Literacy appropriation (line item 1596-2437). The FY2025 budget authorized $20 million, while the subsequent FY2026 presentation reported approximately $3.83 million in projected FY2025 spending. The difference of

approximately $16.17 million represented 80.9% of the original appropriation and prompted further examination of the administrative processes separating legislative authorization from the delivery of educational services.

The investigation expanded when subsequent budget presentations revealed substantial revisions in reported and anticipated expenditures. An earlier FY2027 presentation identified approximately $2.89 million in FY2025 actual expenditures and $32.11 million in projected FY2026 spending—an elevenfold increase. The FY2027 Governor's recommendation separately proposed $25 million for the following fiscal year.

The more recent FY2027 enacted-budget records supplied for this investigation reported revised figures of approximately **$2.73 million in FY2025 actual expenditures and $25.76 million in FY2026 projected spending**, representing a **9.43-fold increase**. The FY2026 projection exceeded that year's $15 million appropriation by approximately $10.76 million, while the FY2027 enacted-budget presentation showed $0 for this specific line item.

The composition of projected spending was equally significant. Grants and subsidies increased from approximately $161,000 in FY2025 actual expenditures to $17.19 million in FY2026 projected expenditures, suggesting a substantial anticipated shift toward programmatic distribution. These figures warrant examination of available balances, expenditure authority, grant awards, and the administrative mechanisms supporting projected spending. The FY2027 line-item figure also requires investigation of potential successor appropriations or alternative funding arrangements before conclusions can be drawn about program continuation.

These fluctuations reinforced the importance of incorporating public-finance developments into **Western Massachusetts' collective regional intelligence**. Regional stakeholders should be equipped to recognize significant changes in anticipated investment, understand the administrative and programmatic factors contributing to those changes, identify which communities and institutions receive resources, and assess whether accelerated expenditures translate into measurable improvements in literacy outcomes.

Appropriations, projected expenditures, and actual spending represent distinct fiscal measures. Their differences do not independently establish mismanagement, permanently unused resources, or successful implementation. They establish the need for transparent examination of funding schedules, expenditure records, recipient-level allocations, institutional readiness, program delivery, and educational outcomes.

I extended this analysis to related education investments, including Early College and Innovation Pathways, school building capital supports, the 21st Century Education Trust Fund, and English Language and Literacy Programs. Spending patterns varied across programs, while Chapter 70 education aid provided an important counterexample of substantially aligned appropriations and projected expenditures. These comparisons reinforced the need for program-specific evaluation across the full administrative lifecycle of public investment.

Historical Evidence and Compounding Educational Conditions

The financial investigation raised a second question: **How long had the educational needs underlying contemporary literacy investments been documented?**

In **1988**, the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners recorded an estimate that more than 500,000 Massachusetts residents possessed reading and writing skills below the fourth-grade level. That year, Governor Michael Dukakis announced the Commonwealth Literacy Corps, establishing 46 public library literacy resource centers. Although these figures concern adult literacy and cannot be directly compared with contemporary student assessments, they demonstrate that literacy had received formal public recognition and an organized institutional response decades earlier.

In **1990**, Harvard researchers Jeanne Chall, Vicki Jacobs, and Luke Baldwin published *The Reading Crisis: Why Poor Children Fall Behind*. Their research examined literacy development among children from low-income families and documented the phenomenon commonly described as the *fourth-grade slump*. Students who initially demonstrated adequate reading performance encountered increasing difficulty as academic demands shifted toward complex vocabulary, comprehension, and disciplinary learning. Their findings illustrated how foundational literacy difficulties could intensify across successive stages of education.

The **Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education's 1991 report, *Every Child a Winner!*,** advanced a comprehensive reform agenda addressing educational standards, accountability, instructional capacity, and funding equity. These recommendations contributed to the broader policy environment preceding the **Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993**, which substantially restructured school finance and statewide educational accountability.

A subsequent evaluation, **MassINC's 2009 *Incomplete Grade: Massachusetts Education Reform at 15***, documented measurable improvements in funding equity and student achievement following the reforms, alongside persistent educational disparities. The report also identified increasingly concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage. In 2008, students classified as low-income represented 78.5% of enrollment in Springfield, 76.7% in Holyoke, and 55.6% in Greenfield.

These findings established that institutional interventions can produce meaningful improvements while the underlying conditions influencing public need continue to evolve. They also demonstrated the importance of examining statewide policy through the distinct economic and institutional circumstances of individual communities.

Contemporary performance data extended the historical inquiry. Massachusetts fourth-grade NAEP reading scores declined from 236 in 2017 to 225 in 2024, an 11-point decrease across the selected assessment years, despite successive policy efforts that included the 2019 State Literacy Strategic Plan and subsequent literacy initiatives.

The historical record therefore documents recurring periods of identified need, research, policy recognition, institutional intervention, and evaluation. It raises important questions about how accumulated evidence informs subsequent decisions, how earlier interventions are assessed, and how changing community conditions influence the effectiveness of public investment.

Development of the Need-to-Outcome Gap

This investigation exposed a limitation in evaluating public investment primarily through announcements, appropriations, or program expenditures. These measures capture important stages of government activity but provide an incomplete account of the period between the emergence of a public problem and the achievement of meaningful improvement.

I developed the **Need-to-Outcome Gap** to describe the interval between an identifiable public need and the realization of a measurable outcome through institutional intervention.

The framework examines the following progression:



Within this broader framework, the **Need-to-Recognition Gap** concerns the period between the emergence of a measurable condition and institutional recognition sufficient to generate coordinated action. The **Announcement–Implementation Gap** examines the interval between a public commitment and the operational availability of an intervention. The **Appropriation-to-Impact Gap** traces the relationship between authorized resources, implementation, and measurable results.

These distinctions provide a method for identifying where delays, administrative barriers, implementation challenges, or discontinuities may occur. They also recognize that certain intervals reflect necessary legislative, regulatory, financial, and operational processes.

The literacy investigation demonstrated why the entire sequence must remain visible. Historical evidence may document a condition decades before a particular intervention is introduced, while contemporary budget records may show substantial fluctuations in anticipated spending without establishing when services reach communities or whether measurable outcomes follow.

The central analytical question is how effectively institutions navigate these stages while maintaining continuity between the needs originally documented and the outcomes ultimately achieved.

Compounding Conditions and Institutional Responsiveness

The historical literacy research introduced an additional consideration: **the conditions that generate public need may intensify while institutional responses are being developed and implemented.**

Chall's research demonstrated how early literacy difficulties could become increasingly consequential as students encountered more demanding academic material. The MassINC evaluation documented how educational reform operated alongside rising concentrations of poverty and changing language-support needs in particular school districts.

These findings informed my examination of two interrelated processes.

Developmental compounding occurs when an unresolved foundational difficulty influences subsequent stages of learning or development, increasing the complexity of later intervention.

Structural compounding occurs when persistent public needs interact with changing socioeconomic, demographic, institutional, or resource conditions.

Both processes are relevant to understanding the Need-to-Outcome Gap. The conditions present when a public problem is first documented may differ substantially from those encountered when an intervention becomes operational. As needs accumulate or evolve, the resources and strategies necessary to produce meaningful outcomes may also change.

The substantial fluctuations documented in contemporary literacy expenditures add a further administrative dimension. Accelerated spending may reflect the implementation of previously authorized programs, the release of accumulated resources, changes in grant schedules, or other fiscal and operational factors. Understanding these changes requires examining both the timing of expenditure and the institutional capacity to translate resources into effective services.

This relationship introduces an important dimension of institutional accountability: evaluating public intervention requires attention to the timing of the response, the changing conditions surrounding implementation, and the institution's capacity to adapt.

The investigation consequently informed my concept of **Institutional Learning Capacity**, defined as the ability of public systems to translate longitudinal evidence, historical research, community experience, and prior implementation outcomes into improved policy recognition, program design, and coordinated action.

Implications for Regional Intelligence and Advocacy

The Massachusetts literacy investigation established a methodological approach applicable to persistent economic-development challenges throughout Western Massachusetts.

Regional communities experience public investments through multiple administrative and institutional stages. Funding authorization does not establish immediate program accessibility, and program implementation does not independently demonstrate that the underlying community need

has been resolved.

The Need-to-Outcome Gap provides a framework for examining these relationships across education, housing, workforce development, transportation, infrastructure, public health, and other areas of regional concern.

Its application requires documenting when a need became identifiable, how institutions responded, what resources were authorized, how implementation proceeded, and whether measurable improvements followed. It also requires examining how unresolved conditions evolved during the intervening period.

The literacy expenditure findings demonstrate the practical importance of maintaining a shared regional understanding of public investment. Significant changes in appropriations, projections, expenditure patterns, and grant distribution should be documented and communicated in ways that allow regional institutions to anticipate opportunities, assess implementation capacity, identify geographic disparities, and evaluate outcomes.

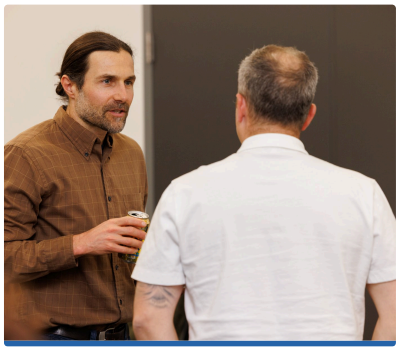
The investigation therefore strengthened the Regional Intelligence Report's emphasis on institutional coordination, administrative accessibility, implementation capacity, longitudinal accountability, and the preservation of regional knowledge.

The central finding is that the effectiveness of public investment depends upon the relationship among the timing of institutional recognition, the continuity of implementation, the evolution of community conditions, and the outcomes ultimately achieved. The Need-to-Outcome Gap provides a framework for examining that relationship, while the literacy investigation demonstrates why both historical evidence and contemporary fiscal intelligence are necessary to understand it.

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8.5. Institutional Learning and Anticipatory Public Administration

The literacy investigation raised a broader question about the relationship between historical evidence and institutional responsiveness.

Public institutions frequently possess extensive records of community conditions, prior interventions, performance measures, and administrative experience. Their capacity to integrate that information into subsequent decisions determines whether accumulated knowledge improves future policy development.

I define **Institutional Learning Capacity** as the ability of public systems to translate longitudinal evidence, community intelligence, implementation experience, and historical knowledge into earlier recognition, more effective intervention, and improved institutional coordination.

A useful thought experiment illustrates this principle.

Consider a house equipped with an emergency telephone. When a fire becomes visible, residents contact emergency services, which respond through an established system. That response remains necessary. However, a more developed system also incorporates smoke detectors, heat sensors, sprinklers, inspections, building codes, prevention protocols, and institutional learning from previous incidents.

These mechanisms do not eliminate emergencies. They improve the ability to recognize developing conditions, intervene earlier, and reduce preventable harm.

The public-administration equivalent is an institutional system capable of recognizing emerging or persistent problems through longitudinal evidence, community reporting, and prior implementation experience.

Literacy, housing instability, food insecurity, infrastructure deterioration, climate resilience, workforce shortages, and organizational sustainability all raise questions about the timing of institutional recognition and the effectiveness of subsequent responses.

The objective is to strengthen **anticipatory public infrastructure**: coordinated systems that can identify emerging conditions, establish meaningful thresholds for action, retain historical knowledge, and adapt policy before preventable challenges become more complex.

A 2023 FiscalNote analysis reportedly ranked the Massachusetts Legislature 50th among states under its legislative-productivity methodology. This finding requires substantial caution. Bill counts and related indicators do not independently measure legislative effectiveness, and Massachusetts uses multiple legislative and budgetary mechanisms. Its relevance is limited to the broader question of how institutional processes can be evaluated and improved.

The more significant inquiry concerns whether government systems can develop the administrative responsiveness, continuity, and learning capacity necessary to address persistent public needs as conditions change.

8.6. Regional Assets, Persistent Recommendations, and Differential Impact

The framework also emerged from recurring observations about the relationship between Western Massachusetts' existing assets and its development outcomes.

The region possesses substantial educational institutions, cultural organizations, businesses, public infrastructure, research capacity, civic networks, natural resources, and community-development expertise. Yet the presence of these assets does not automatically establish their accessibility, coordination, or contribution to shared regional outcomes.

I developed the **Asset-to-Outcome Gap** to examine the conditions that influence whether existing regional assets achieve their potential public value.

Two additional concepts support this inquiry.

Recommendation Persistence examines the recurrence of substantially similar recommendations across regional studies, strategic plans, institutional reports, and public convenings.

Structural Persistence examines whether the underlying conditions identified by those recommendations remain present over time.

The recurrence of a recommendation does not establish that it was ignored. Persistence may reflect incomplete implementation, insufficient scale, divided institutional responsibility, changing circumstances, structural constraints, or the need for sustained intervention.

The analytical objective is to determine what occurred after previous recommendations were issued, what actions were implemented, and how subsequent conditions changed.

Differential Regional Impact and Regional Equity

The four counties of Western Massachusetts do not experience public policy through identical economic, geographic, demographic, or institutional conditions.

Springfield and other Gateway Cities, rural municipalities, Berkshire communities, college-centered towns, and communities with different transportation networks, fiscal capacities, population densities, and administrative resources may encounter the same statewide initiative differently.

Differential Regional Impact describes variation in the accessibility, implementation, and outcomes of public policies across distinct communities.

Regional Equity concerns the fair distribution of opportunity, resources, institutional support, and implementation capacity in relation to those differing conditions.

Equity therefore does not necessarily require identical interventions. It requires examining whether policy design and delivery are sufficiently responsive to the circumstances of the communities they intend to serve.

This distinction is particularly important when statewide programs rely on competitive applications, local matching resources, specialized administrative expertise, or implementation-ready projects.







8.7. Regional Knowledge Infrastructure and Institutional Continuity

The investigation identified knowledge preservation as an important component of regional capacity.

I define **Knowledge Infrastructure** as the relationships, records, convenings, shared data, institutional memory, networks, and intermediary systems that enable a region to retain and use what it learns.

Regional knowledge is accumulated through formal research, government records, community experience, institutional relationships, and collaborative initiatives. Without deliberate preservation and transfer, organizational transitions can result in the loss of information that would otherwise support future decision-making.

The planned closure of the Springfield Creative City Collective makes this concern particularly relevant.

Preserving the knowledge generated through WMEES does not require preserving SCCC as an organization. It requires intentional documentation, transfer, and future stewardship of the research, relationships, regional findings, and institutional lessons developed through the Summit series.

This responsibility extends beyond archival preservation. Regional intelligence must remain accessible and usable by the municipalities, institutions, organizations, policymakers, and community stakeholders responsible for subsequent action.

Knowledge Infrastructure therefore supports institutional continuity, reduces unnecessary duplication, and creates opportunities for future regional initiatives to build upon previous work.







8.8. Gap-Investment Infrastructure and Shared Responsibility

The research also demonstrated the importance of recognizing existing institutional supports.

Massachusetts has developed programs and administrative systems intended to improve access to public resources, including the Federal Funds & Infrastructure Office, GrantWell, MassDOT Municipal Planning and Support, Small Business Technical Assistance, MassTech Collaborative, and environmental grants and technical-assistance infrastructure.

I describe these and related resources collectively as **Gap-Investment Infrastructure**: the technical assistance, planning capacity, intermediaries, data systems, project pipelines, grant-development resources, matching resources, institutional relationships, and implementation supports that connect identified public needs to available investment.

The existence of this infrastructure changes the regional inquiry. It requires examining whether support systems are sufficiently known, accessible, coordinated, scaled, geographically responsive, and effective.

It also establishes the importance of **Shared Responsibility**.

The Commonwealth holds responsibility for equitable investment, transparent implementation, accessible administrative systems, technical assistance, and responsiveness to documented public needs.

Western Massachusetts holds responsibility for strengthening relationships with state partners, identifying and using existing support infrastructure, developing implementation-ready projects, documenting administrative barriers, coordinating institutional efforts, preserving regional knowledge, and communicating the differentiated conditions of its communities.

These responsibilities are not equivalent in authority or resources, but they are interconnected.

Effective regional coordination requires communication across three levels:

- **Micro:** Residents, entrepreneurs, workers, and individual businesses experiencing community conditions directly.
- **Mezzo:** Municipalities, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, regional intermediaries, and community-development networks.
- **Macro:** State agencies, authorities, legislative institutions, executive offices, and major statewide systems.

Information must move across these levels to support accurate policy recognition, accessible program design, coordinated implementation, and meaningful evaluation.

Shared Responsibility therefore concerns the institutional relationships necessary to connect local experience, regional capacity, and statewide decision-making.

8.9. Framework Limitations and Research Priorities

The Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Framework is an interpretive and developmental research model.

Its concepts should not be treated as validated causal relationships, evidence that every public program experiences the same implementation challenges, proof that Western Massachusetts is uniquely disadvantaged, or substitutes for program-specific evaluation.

The framework must remain responsive to evidence that supports, complicates, or contradicts its initial assumptions.

Future investigation should examine administrative data, application-to-award ratios, award and expenditure timelines, geographic distribution, applicant experiences, implementation records, workforce conditions, organizational turnover, institutional knowledge transfer, and measurable community outcomes.

Comparisons with other regions would help distinguish conditions specific to Western Massachusetts from broader characteristics of public administration and regional development.

For any major regional issue or investment, the framework establishes a consistent sequence of research questions:

- When did the public need become identifiable, and what evidence documented it?
- How and when did institutions recognize the condition and initiate a coordinated response?
- What policies, appropriations, programs, and administrative mechanisms followed?
- Who could practically access the available resources, and what did access require?
- How were resources awarded, obligated, expended, and implemented?
- How did implementation differ across communities and institutions?
- What measurable outcomes followed, and how did the underlying conditions change?
- Which recommendations, challenges, or structural barriers persisted?
- What institutional knowledge should inform subsequent decisions?

The framework does not presume that insufficient investment is always the primary explanation for persistent regional challenges.

Depending on the evidence, an investigation may identify inadequate funding, implementation delays, administrative complexity, limited local capacity, fragmented coordination, insufficient awareness of existing resources, differential geographic impact, or combinations of these conditions.

Its purpose is to provide the analytical structure necessary to distinguish among those explanations.

The broader contribution of the Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Framework is the development of a cumulative approach to regional learning. By examining public needs, institutional responses, investment pathways, administrative accessibility, human sustainability, geographic differences, and measurable outcomes together, regional stakeholders can build a more precise understanding of the systems influencing economic and community development.

The framework establishes regional intelligence as an ongoing institutional responsibility: to document what is known, investigate what remains unresolved, preserve accumulated knowledge, and evaluate whether public action produces meaningful improvements across Western Massachusetts.

CHAPTER 9

Regional Intelligence, Implementation, and the Future of Western Massachusetts



Complementary Research and Regional Coordination

By the later stages of the Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit (WMEES) series, multiple bodies of research were examining interconnected dimensions of the region's economic ecosystem.

The Sphere's *Breaking Barriers* work focuses on entrepreneurship and capital access. The Western Massachusetts Arts and Culture Alliance's (WMAAC) *Regional Perspectives* work incorporates arts and cultural stakeholders into economic-development analysis. *Building Homes, Building Futures* provides four-county housing evidence. MassINC and Cambridge Econometrics examine inclusive growth and transformative investment, while state infrastructure and rural-policy research document municipal and geographic constraints.

These initiatives represent complementary bodies of regional intelligence. Each contributes evidence through different methodologies, institutional relationships, and areas of expertise.

Their collective value lies in identifying where findings converge, where county-level conditions differ, and where recommendations require clearer implementation responsibility.

The Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Framework provides a common analytical structure through which these findings can be examined without diminishing their individual contributions. Its concepts of Recommendation Persistence, Structural Persistence, Differential Regional Impact, and the Need-to-Outcome Gap support longitudinal examination of regional conditions, institutional responses, and measurable results.

A more coordinated regional research environment would allow stakeholders to preserve distinct bodies of evidence while developing shared mechanisms for tracking recommendations, public investment, implementation, and outcomes.

Implementation and Public Accountability

The findings of this report establish the importance of evaluating public investment across its complete administrative lifecycle.

Public announcements, appropriations, awards, obligations, expenditures, implementation, and measurable outcomes represent distinct stages of institutional activity. Maintaining visibility across these stages would allow regional stakeholders to distinguish between insufficient resources, administrative delays, implementation barriers, and interventions whose outcomes remain uncertain.

This approach requires reciprocal commitments from public institutions and regional stakeholders.

State agencies, authorities, and funding institutions should provide accessible information concerning program timelines, eligibility requirements, application-to-award ratios, geographic distribution, expenditure records, and measurable outcomes wherever feasible.

Regional organizations, municipalities, and intermediaries should strengthen project readiness, maintain relationships with technical-assistance providers, document unsuccessful funding pursuits, and coordinate responses to shared implementation challenges.

Administrative accessibility also warrants evaluation alongside traditional measures of program reach. Competitive funding systems can require substantial investments of organizational labor before an award is secured. Proportionate application requirements, preliminary expressions of interest, multiyear support, meaningful applicant feedback, and greater transparency can help reduce unnecessary administrative burdens.

The Massachusetts literacy investigation illustrates the importance of this approach. Significant changes in projected public expenditures may indicate expanding implementation activity, but their eventual significance depends on the distribution of resources, the accessibility of funded programs, institutional capacity, and measurable improvements experienced by communities.

A regional intelligence system capable of monitoring these developments would strengthen both public accountability and the region's ability to anticipate and respond to emerging opportunities.







Regional Readiness and Institutional Stewardship

The next phase of regional development requires the capacity to translate accumulated research and institutional relationships into coordinated action.

This includes maintaining implementation-ready project pipelines, strengthening relationships among municipalities and regional intermediaries, improving access to technical assistance, and establishing consistent channels through which local conditions can inform state-level decision-making.

It also requires deliberate stewardship of the knowledge generated through WMEES.

The planned closure of the Springfield Creative City Collective (SCCC) creates a practical opportunity to demonstrate that institutional continuity does not depend upon the indefinite preservation of a single organization.

The research, relationships, methodologies, and regional findings developed through the Summit series can remain valuable beyond SCCC's organizational lifespan if they are intentionally documented, transferred, and maintained.

Potential stewardship functions include:

- Maintaining a living regional recommendation and implementation tracker.
- Convening periodic four-county strategy sessions grounded in evidence and identified priorities.
- Preserving updated ecosystem maps, institutional relationships, and referral pathways.
- Coordinating research exchange among economic-development organizations, planning agencies, municipalities, educational institutions, funders, and state partners.
- Translating public investment opportunities into accessible regional information while documenting implementation barriers.
- Preserving WMEES records, findings, and methodologies as resources for continued regional learning.

The appropriate successor structure should be evaluated according to its functions rather than its resemblance to WMEES.

Its value would lie in preserving knowledge, strengthening relationships, supporting implementation, maintaining cross-county coordination, and creating accountability without unnecessarily duplicating institutions already performing essential work.






Representing Western Massachusetts: Internal and External Marketing, Public Relations, and Place

Western Massachusetts faces an additional economic-development question that is more difficult to quantify than housing, infrastructure, workforce participation, or capital access: how the region understands and communicates its contemporary identity.

Berkshire, Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties contain cities, rural municipalities, former industrial centers, college communities, agricultural economies, healthcare and educational institutions, cultural organizations, advanced manufacturers, entrepreneurs, tourism destinations, and communities with substantially different histories and economic conditions. Individual places also carry well-known concepts, reputations, and sometimes stereotypes. Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, Amherst, Pittsfield, North Adams, Greenfield, Great Barrington, and smaller municipalities are interpreted through different historical and cultural narratives. Some remain useful; others may be incomplete, dated, or externally constructed.

The challenge is not simply to create a better slogan. It is to determine how Western Massachusetts can retain meaningful elements of assumed identity while continuously updating how its communities understand themselves and how the region is represented to employers, workers, residents, investors, policymakers, visitors, and one another.

A longstanding regional marketing question

The 2017 'West Mass' rebranding controversy demonstrates that this question predates WMEES. Regional economic-development and tourism leaders were attempting to address talent attraction and external recognition, yet the proposed identity generated significant public resistance. Nearly a decade later, a 2026 MassLive article covering WMEES was itself framed around the region 'searching for identity.' Considered together, these sources suggest that regional identity has persisted alongside economic-development strategy rather than sitting outside it (Connecting Point, 2017; MassLive, 2017, 2026).

Tourism is an asset, but not a complete regional identity

Western Massachusetts' recreational, agricultural, cultural, and tourism assets are economically significant and should remain visible. The concern is not that the Commonwealth markets foliage, farms, trails, mountains, food, cultural destinations, and family recreation. The question is whether

the aggregate external representation of Western Massachusetts sufficiently communicates the full economic complexity of the region.

At its most exaggerated, an external narrative can reduce the four-county region to a weekend alternative to the pace of Boston: family farms, seasonal foliage, homemade ice cream, scenic drives, and recreation. That representation may be effective tourism marketing, but if it becomes dominant it can feel simplified relative to a region that also contains advanced manufacturing, research institutions, healthcare systems, technology, entrepreneurship, major cultural institutions, clean-energy infrastructure, higher education, urban economies, and complex public systems.

This report does not establish that Commonwealth marketing is intentionally patronizing, that residents broadly experience it that way, or that tourism-oriented representation causes lower public or private investment. Regional identity is subjective and emotionally charged, and these claims require substantial limitations. The appropriate research question is narrower: to what extent does the way a state, regional institutions, media, and tourism authorities represent a place influence the opportunities policymakers, investors, workers, institutions, and residents imagine are appropriate for that place?

Competing internal narratives and state/federal legibility

The issue is not exclusively external. Western Massachusetts communicates multiple and sometimes competing accounts of what the region is. A state or federal partner may hear materially different descriptions from Springfield, Berkshire County, rural Franklin County, higher education, tourism organizations, regional planning agencies, businesses, and community organizations. Each can be accurate within its context. The challenge is translating those perspectives into usable regional intelligence. When the same geography is described through substantially different narratives, public and private partners may have greater difficulty identifying which needs are shared, which are place-specific, and which institutions are positioned to implement a response.

Internal responsibility and regional self-awareness

Western Massachusetts therefore has an internal responsibility to continue learning about itself. Periodic reassessment of industries, demographic change, emerging sectors, cultural assets, workforce, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, housing, institutional relationships, and residents' understandings of place can improve both external communication and internal coordination. The Berkshire Blueprint, county CEDS processes, municipal plans, regional research, and WMEES provide components of that knowledge base.

Further research should examine state and regional tourism campaigns, economic-development materials, agency websites, social media, workforce-recruitment campaigns, site-selection materials, press coverage, and regional organizations' own communications, then compare those representations with actual economic composition, investment patterns, demographic change, business formation, and external perceptions. The purpose would not be to police language but to determine whether regional representation has measurable economic consequences.

For this report, the immediate conclusion is limited: effective four-county economic development requires both internal self-awareness and external legibility. A more accurate understanding of Western Massachusetts may make it easier for regional stakeholders, the Commonwealth, and federal partners to design systems proportionate to the region's actual complexity.

Conclusion: Regional Continuity and Collective Responsibility

The Western Massachusetts Economic Ecosystem Summit series demonstrates that regionalism is sustained through relationships, reciprocity, shared leadership, documentation, and the willingness to learn across geographic and institutional boundaries. Over nine convenings, WMEES evolved from a local ecosystem conversation into a four-county body of regional intelligence because its participants allowed the work to develop in response to the conditions and perspectives encountered throughout the region.

The research presented in this report establishes that Western Massachusetts possesses substantial assets, institutional expertise, economic potential, and community leadership. It also demonstrates that the outcomes associated with those resources depend upon the systems connecting public need, institutional recognition, investment, accessibility, implementation, and accountability.

Housing, infrastructure, capital access, workforce development, education, energy, culture, public health, entrepreneurship, and community sustainability are interconnected dimensions of regional economic development. Their relationships require coordinated analysis and sustained institutional attention.

The Western Massachusetts Regional Intelligence Framework offers a method for examining these conditions over time. Its emphasis on the Need-to-Outcome Gap, administrative accessibility, implementation capacity, human sustainability, institutional learning, and regional equity establishes a basis for more informed public investment and shared accountability.

The conclusion of SCCC's leadership of WMEES does not diminish the importance of the relationships, research, and collective understanding generated through the Summit series. It establishes a responsibility to preserve that knowledge, strengthen the institutions capable of using it, and ensure that future regional initiatives can build upon what has already been learned.

The next phase of this work will require disciplined implementation, continued research, transparent public investment, institutional coordination, and a four-county advocacy voice capable of respecting the distinct conditions of Western Massachusetts communities while advancing shared regional priorities.

The enduring measure of this work will be whether Western Massachusetts develops the collective capacity to transform what it knows about its communities into sustained, equitable, and measurable improvements in the lives of the people who call this region home.

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