



NEXUS OF INNOVATION

▶ THE ANGULAR STEEL structure perched at the southern edge of the William Stanley Business Park in Pittsfield has been quietly looming for over 12 months.

It's not so quiet anymore, though. Contractors put the finishing touches on the Berkshire Innovation Center (BIC) this winter, and a grand opening and ribbon cutting is slated for February 28. Now the building is a conduit for connections and collaborations between engineers, students, business owners, and customers of life science technologies in the Berkshires and beyond.

"I'm so relieved to see this thing realized," says Stephen Boyd, the BIC's board chair and longtime champion. His sentiment comes as no surprise, given his and others' efforts over the past ten years to bring the project to fruition.

The idea was conceived when former Massachusetts Senator Ben Downing earmarked

THE BIC IS WHERE MEMBERS SHARE IDEAS, GET INSPIRED, AND SOLVE PROBLEMS

—By—

JULIA DIXON

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\$6.5 million in the state's landmark \$1 billion life sciences bill for an incubator facility at the then-vacant business park. The bill's aim was to cement the state's reputation as a leader in science, technology, engineering, and math, or "STEM" fields, and Downing saw an opportunity for Pittsfield to accelerate its own biotech industry with a state-of-the-art facility.

STEM technologies—and technologists—have long been fixtures in Pittsfield's economic landscape. General Electric attracted engineers and researchers to the city for decades to work in its power transformer, plastics, and aerospace divisions. The rise (and fall) of GE spurred the growth of small supply chain businesses such as Sinicon Plastics and Modern Mold & Tool, as well as larger engineering and advanced manufacturing companies including General Dynamics and Sabic Innovative Plastics.

Early motivation for the BIC, Boyd

explains, was to provide support to these legacy businesses and enterprises. But a 2014 feasibility study revealed that the life sciences environment in Berkshire County could not support an incubator. “Instead, we decided to create an innovation hub for the life sciences, where our anchor companies can blue-sky ideas with anyone,” says Boyd.

The study initiated a shift in direction, along with shifts in the timeline and budget. Project leaders worked with state and local officials to raise over \$14 million in construction and operational funds. Berkshire Community College was awarded close to \$1 million for new equipment to be housed at the BIC.

“The BIC’s business plan highlights membership, shared equipment, and collaborative training,” says Boyd. “It’s not a residential model; it’s a center of best practices where members can share ideas, be inspired, and solve problems.”

The BIC’s ground-floor tech arena and rapid prototyping lab contain machines and software ideal for engineering research and development. A hulking Hexagon Metrology CMM—or coordinated measurement machine—creates three-dimensional laser scans of just about any object, which become computer

design files that can be sent to 3D printers. “The technology here represents the widest range, from tools for hobbyists to things businesses can’t afford to have, like the CMM machine,” says Steve Longpre, the BIC’s operations manager.

Longpre, an additive (3D) manufacturing expert, relocated to the Berkshires from neighboring Pioneer Valley. “My work here is aligned with my interest in metals and plastics,” he says. “We’re on the path to print 3D metal, which uses powder converted from metal waste.”

The Stratasys J750, a high-end 3D printer that creates ultraviolet light-cured resins out of various types of plastic, is ideal for life science product research. “This machine is flexible enough that we feel comfortable around the types of platforms it can support, from diagnostics to lateral flow medical devices—pregnancy tests, for example,” says Boyd.

Upstairs, a 640-square-foot wet lab will facilitate wet chemical extraction research in plastics, fibers, cellulose, and other engineered materials (think BPA-free water bottles), and a product development clean room is available for members who need a controlled testing environment.

REAL ESTATE

Building up our downtowns

DEVELOPERS ARE REVITALIZING city and town centers with mixed-use construction that is in line with the shift toward walkable neighborhoods—and with the goal of attracting new residents.

Great Barrington paved the way with 47 Railroad, the upscale renovation of the historic Granary building. All 13 apartments and five commercial spaces are rented. The “Flying Church” in the former United Methodist Church at 198 Main Street has leased some of its nine retail and commercial units. Tenants include Studio 23 (home goods and design services) and Evoque Investments. The largest space, at 5,000 square feet, is on the market as a performance or restaurant space. A small building shares the same lot—the business’s name, COFFEE, says it all. Owner Paul Joffe created the distinctive tile roof and plans a walk-up window.

The \$30 million Powerhouse Square, home of Berkshire Co-op, has five retail and four commercial spaces. (Owner Michael Charles says they will be built to spec.) There are also 22 condo units on the market, starting at \$375,00.

Construction has begun on the 100 Bridge Street affordable housing project, co-developed by Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire (CDCSB) and Berkshire Housing Development Corporation. The 45 rentals will have an income cap of \$53,000 for a family of four. Leasing is planned for spring 2021. The \$17.8-million project was made possible in part by funding from the Great Barrington Preservation Committee, which CDCSB executive director Tim Geller says has been very supportive. Plans for the 49-unit 910 Main affordable housing project is also underway, pending final funding with \$1 million already secured.

In Lenox, Nathan Winstanley has conditional approval from the historic district commission and is seeking special permits from the zoning board of appeals to create Windrose Place at 114 Main Street. This is the site of a historic 9,986-square-foot building in Lenox Village built in 1790 by Colonel Elijah Northrup. The proposed plan includes renovating the structure for commercial and residential use, and constructing

three multi-family, residential buildings, one with retail shops and professional offices on the ground floor. The projected cost is \$17 to \$20 million and would include 27 high-end residential units for second-home owners and retirees.

In North Adams, Moresi Associates is building on its success with Norad Mill by converting three existing sites. The Wall Streeter (formerly the Wall Street Shoe Factory) at 26 Union Street will have commercial spaces on the first floor (Northern Berkshire School Union has leased the largest) and ten luxury apartments on the upper two, with a move-in date by early 2021. Williams College has committed to leasing half of those for faculty.

“This will be transformative for bringing a whole other dynamic to downtown,” says developer David Moresi. There’s more: The 125-year-old Johnson School building, now home to Berkshire County Head Start, will open in 2021 with 20 apartments. And the mixed-use building adjacent to the North Adams Library will be strictly residential, says Moresi, for a total of six units “for empty nesters.” —EVELYN BATTAGLIA

In addition to labs and prototyping spaces, the BIC features four boardrooms that double as classrooms, as well as an adaptable 100-person event space that can be used for lectures, job fairs, member product launches, and press conferences.

"The priority for me is to create dynamic programs and content in-house," Boyd says. "We are building a job-specific training institute for our members in collaboration with our rich educational partners. The BIC provides a little bit of a lot of resources in one building."

Membership levels, which are determined by company size, vary from \$2,500 to \$12,500 annually and require a three-year commitment. Usage fees—payments for room or equipment rentals—are discounted for members. It's a model that requires active usership. But with nearly 20 members already committed, Boyd is confident in the BIC's business plan. "The BIC could be a really cool model to replicate in other rural communities," he says.

Although the BIC was not built as a business incubator, it offers a limited number of dedicated desks and accelerator space for rapidly growing companies. Electro Magnetic Applications (EMA), a Colorado-based company that studies how lightning interacts with

materials, moved into one of the BIC's two accelerator spaces this winter. The company chose the BIC after receiving a \$225,000 National Science Foundation grant in December to develop an aerospace simulation chamber in Pittsfield.

"We don't need lots of square footage, but it's a great advantage to have lab space, meeting rooms, and classrooms for trainings in one location," says Justin McKennon, a principal scientist at EMA. "Plus, BIC's operations manager has a ton of material research experience. The industry is moving towards carbon composite structures, and 3D printing is a popular method to create them."

Ben Sosne, executive director of the BIC, says this kind of collaboration is what the organization was created for. "I see the BIC as a collision point in the Berkshires," he says.

Members not only have opportunities to work together, but are exposed to sponsors, board members, and anchor tenants including venture capital firm Milltown Capital, which moved its offices from Framework in downtown Pittsfield to the BIC in December.

"We want this place to come alive as quickly as possible," says Boyd.

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