

Pittsfield Focuses on Improving Neighborhoods

By [Joseph Bednar](#) February 5, 2019

Community Spotlight

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Mayor Linda Tyler says Pittsfield's leaders remain focused on the needs of its individual neighborhoods in order to generate economic development.

As part of her annual state-of-the-city address recently, Pittsfield Mayor Linda Tyler praised the arrival of [Wayfair](#) — the fastest-growing e-commerce home-décor company in the world — on a number of levels.

Perhaps most importantly, by opening a sales and service center, the company has created 300 new jobs in Pittsfield. Wayfair is also a locally grown success story, founded by Pittsfield High School graduate Niraj Shah. And, Tyler said, Wayfair's presence signals to other major employers that they can be successful in this city of about 45,000 people in the heart of Berkshire County.

But Wayfair's arrival speaks to a broader success story as well — that of a city-wide development strategy that's bearing fruit.

“Wayfair choosing Pittsfield wasn't happenstance,” she said. “Rather, the foundation was set with the alignment of the city's economic-development strategy. The city joined forces with the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority and the Pittsfield Economic Revitalization Corporation. Together, we created the ‘red-carpet team,’ the Mayor's Economic Development Council, and a new position of Business Development manager.”

In their discussions with companies looking to set up shop in Pittsfield, Tyler noted, those entities are touting not only the economic benefits of doing business here, but quality of life. And people are listening.

“We prepared our presentation assuming that Wayfair will want to know what incentives we might be able to offer them,” she explained. “As the first session got underway, Wayfair's representatives said they're not yet interested in the financial incentives. They'd rather learn about Pittsfield's lifestyle, our schools, our neighborhoods. They wanted to make sure that our community culture aligned with Wayfair's culture.”

The city's red-carpet team, made up of city and state officials whose purpose is to develop strategies and explore incentives to support business expansion or startups, has been deployed in myriad cases to help companies move and expand in Pittsfield. Another resource Tyer is excited about is the Berkshire Innovation Center, which broke ground in September at the William Stanley Business Park.

This 20,000-square-foot facility that will support and advance the work of small and medium companies in the life sciences, advanced manufacturing, and technology, featuring cutting-edge equipment available to advanced manufacturers for research and development of new products. In partnership with Berkshire Community College, the center will be a place of teaching and learning, creating a pipeline of trained employees that area companies desperately need.

Neighborhoods on the Rise

Meanwhile, Tyer touted a downtown district generating energy through its mix of eateries, boutiques, and urban apartments, not mention a renovation of the historic Beacon Cinema on North Street by new owner [Phoenix Theatres](#), which refreshed the interior, enhanced the seats, and added more showtimes.

“Downtown is Pittsfield’s front porch,” Tyer said. “We must remain watchful, always, to ensure a spirited, vibrant experience for all who live in and visit our city.”

She added that it’s time for the city to build on the successes of the North Street revitalization and focus more attention on the historic Tyler Street artery.

“My grandmother, who just turned 95, grew up on Tyler Street,” the mayor said. “She has fond memories of sitting on the front porch, getting an ice cream, and walking to North Street with her sisters to buy fabric at Newbury’s. Tyler Street can be that again, but with a modern twist.”

Anchored by Berkshire Medical Center, General Dynamics, and the William Stanley Business Park, the neighborhood is ripe for a renaissance, she argued. One development toward that goal is the conversion of the former St. Mary the Morningstar Church to 29 units of market-rate housing, a project that drew on \$125,000 in state finding for infrastructure improvements around the building.

In addition, the Baker-Polito administration awarded a \$30,000 grant last May to support small businesses in the neighborhood. The funding, Tyer explained, will be applied to Pittsfield’s Storefront Enhancement Program. “This is vital financial assistance for businesses to make façade improvements to boost visibility, attractiveness, and ensure accessibility.”

Work also began last summer on the Tyler Street Streetscape Design Project, which aims to create a curated thoroughway that addresses the needs of pedestrians and bicycles, improves lighting and landscaping, identifies dedicated bus stops, preserves on-street parking, and elevates public spaces. The completed design work is expected to be unveiled early this year.

Going forward, the city will continue to seek ways to take advantage of private investment in North Street and Tyler Street, both designated as Opportunity Zones, Tyer said. “Alliances with local and state representatives, financial institutions, and developers will spur capital investment and job creation.”

On the public-safety front, the mayor focused on several incidents in the Westside area of town, citing a meeting with neighborhood residents who expressed their fears and shared their ideas on ways to enhance the work of the police department, while they in turn tried to understand police protocols.

One idea — to establish a Police Department community outreach office in Westside — is becoming a reality, she added, thanks to space being offered by Central Berkshire Habitat for Humanity in its building on Columbus Avenue.

Meanwhile, a series of high-visibility patrol operations were conducted in November and December. The operation, led by the Police Department’s uniformed patrol and anti-crime unit, brought in reinforcements from the Berkshire County Sheriff’s Office, Massachusetts State Police, and the state Alcohol Beverages Control Commission, which, in total, netted 32 arrests, including the seizure of approximately 340 grams of cocaine with an estimated value of \$34,000 and a variety of illicit pills.

“While we tackle the complex issue of crime, our Police Department has established a strong philosophy of community policing,” Tyer added, noting that officers have hosted free movie events, back-to-school meet and greets, and other community activities. “All of these interactions create trusting relationships that will endure with our kids, their families, and our police officers.”

Collaborative Efforts

Still, making the community a more desirable one — again, a factor in attracting new business — doesn’t end with public safety. To that end, an LED street-light conversion will be complete by the spring, replacing some 5,300 streetlights in all, with the dual goal of brighter streets and lower utility bills. Meanwhile, the Westside Riverway Park, a new outdoor space along the west branch of the Housatonic River, extends from Wahconah Park to Clapp Park.

“Paying attention to what’s happening within our neighborhoods continues to be a primary focus. And our efforts are paying dividends,” Tyer said, noting that a surging housing market has increased home values in the city. Still, she added, vigilance against blight and decay in neighborhoods remains a priority for her administration.

“We have cataloged about 100 problem properties,” she noted. “The city’s code-enforcement team tries to identify and exercise all viable options. Our objective is always to preserve as much as possible. Sometimes, demolition is the only option. We continuously balance the cost of demotion against the very real gains that come with keeping our city appealing.”

Finally, 2018 was the first year of Community Preservation projects, the mayor noted. Drawing from a 1% surcharge on property values, the endeavor resulted in a \$580,000 appropriation of funds for investing in historic resources, open space, and recreation. Eleven projects were funded, including the preservation of the Melville Art and Artifacts collection in the Berkshire Athenaeum, the Arrowhead stone wall, restoration of the Springside House, siting and design for pickleball courts, the turf field at Berkshire Community College, and infield restoration at the Pellerin baseball field.

Meanwhile, she said, local partners continue to support improvements in public spaces. This past year, the pavilion at Durant Park went up thanks to a gift from Greylock Federal Credit Union. A Berkshire Bank contribution facilitated the renovation of the basketball court at Lakewood Park, while the Buddy Pellerin Foundation and the Rotary Club are making significant investments in Clapp Park.

The progress Pittsfield has made on these fronts and others are, of course, a collective effort by myriad agencies, businesses, and individuals, Tyer noted. But she wants her administration to set the tone for growth.

“We cultivate an organizational culture that encompasses shared responsibility, proactive long-term planning, dynamic communication and professional development,” she said. “My philosophy around this is simple: when we make decisions that affect the people that we serve, these principles must be in the forefront of our minds.”

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