



The Research Bureau

Worcester Regional Research Bureau

32nd Annual Meeting

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DCU Center

Timothy J. McGourthy Remarks

In the late 1600s, Europeans first arrived on the shores of Lake Quinsigamond seeking to build a new community. As tensions between colonists and indigenous peoples flared, the settlement was abandoned, not once but twice, and Worcester was not established as an official town until 1722. Yet over the years, this struggling community took root and became a center for transportation, industry, and innovation. It also became a home for people from across the globe – a crossroads for ideas and inspiration.

Worcester's ability to struggle, to adapt, to survive, to strive, and to succeed is a hallmark of this city and its people. It is the foundation for our growth as we build on the past, embrace the present, and anticipate a vibrant future. Our living history continues not only in our three-century old government, but in our neighborhoods, our public schools, our colleges and universities, our cultural institutions, and our business community.

Even in my short decade here in Worcester, I have watched this city carefully and deliberately seed opportunities in our downtown, our neighborhoods, and our physical and social infrastructure. We have new residences, businesses, schools, and cultural opportunities. We have

new recreational and transportation options. Today's public and private investment is changing the Worcester experience for the better.

Yet our challenges remain. While we succeed in many areas, we continue to struggle in others. Property tax rates are among the highest in the Commonwealth, our post-employment liability continues to grow, and we have limited citizen interest in public service. Local job growth is relatively flat, although unemployment is generally decreasing. Almost a quarter of our population is in poverty, with people of color disproportionately impacted, and too many of our public school students fail to meet proficiency levels in English, math, and especially science.

In order to move from struggle to adaptation to success, we cannot ignore the roots of our communal problems or simply wish for challenges to disappear. The mission of The Research Bureau, while sometimes unpopular, is to support our successes, identify our failures, and offer a pathway for those striving toward positive change.

I submit two key initiatives that highlight our role:

First, our most important initiative and the reason we are so pleased that Secretary Peyser could join us as keynote speaker, focuses on public education. Public education is not only critical to the future of our young people, but it is critical to the future of our civic leadership. In 2016, The Research Bureau and the Worcester Education Collaborative released *The Urgency of Excellence: Considerations for the School Committee and New Superintendent of Schools in Worcester*. This report highlighted the troubling gap between Worcester's goals and achievements in meeting the federal Race to the Top guidelines for academic outcomes. We called for a new vision and strategic plan that would engage the schools, the community, and civic and business leadership in an effort to craft a framework for operations, finance, and teaching and learning that would position the Worcester Public Schools as the best urban school district in the region and beyond. Superintendent Maureen Binienda has embraced the initiative and has worked hand in glove with The Research Bureau, WEC, and others to engage on the challenges of public education and advance solutions. We are now working with a community coalition to compile quantitative

and qualitative analyses of the schools which will be transformed into targeted recommendations. We expect a draft report by the end of the year and a final strategic plan by the first quarter of 2018 – one we hope will be implemented by both the Worcester Public Schools and a community-driven task force.

Our second major initiative has focused on the property tax and its impact on economic growth. In November 2016, we released *Tax Classification: Passing the Buck\$* - a report that explored the impact of the tax rate on residential, commercial, and industrial property owners. We examined the impact of property tax changes over three decades in every Massachusetts city and town. We found that all properties, but especially commercial and industrial properties, are negatively impacted by significant changes in tax rates. We recommended that Worcester consider a transition to the single tax rate – a move that would buffer all property owners from year-over-year tax changes. In May of this year, we released *A Research Bureau Policy Alternative: Tax Rates*, that laid out a formula and a transition process to serve as a model for City Council as its engages on its annual tax rate process. The City Council's Economic Development Committee took up the discussion, and while there appears to remain significant political opposition to the consideration of a single tax rate, our data and recommendations have both incited and informed the conversation.

Without you, The Research Bureau could not do this work. You have ensured that, over the decades, we have not only survived but thrived as a critical voice in Worcester's civic life. We have many to thank for that success.

Our Executive Committee and our Board of Directors offer their time, talent, and treasure to ensure that we have the capacity to focus, day by day, on the needs of Worcester and its government. I am truly grateful to John Spillane, our outgoing chairman, and all of the Board for your ongoing support and commitment to The Research Bureau and the cause of informed public decision-making.

While the work of our Board is impressive, we are also a product of, and grateful to, the generosity of a much larger community of stakeholders.

In our Annual Report, you will see a listing of the many businesses, institutions, and individuals that provide invaluable support to our efforts. Our contributors represent the civic and business strength of Greater Worcester. A few deserve special recognition. Commerce Bank has been our Presenting Sponsor for nearly a decade. Many thanks to Duddie Massad, Brian Thompson, and Mike Crawford for their continuous support for and involvement in our efforts. While we look forward to welcoming Berkshire Bank even more fully into the Worcester community, we will always appreciate the team at Commerce Bank. Greenberg, Rosenblatt, Kull, and Bitsoli has been an integral part of The Research Bureau's operations for decades and provides incomparable accounting work on our behalf week after week. Rick Powell and Shelly Truett are essentially extensions of The Research Bureau family. PENTA Communications has given The Research Bureau a digital presence that ensures we reach a community well beyond 500 Salisbury Street. Deborah Penta, our incoming Vice Chair, and her team are instrumental in ensuring a professional and effective voice for our findings. I also want to acknowledge our media sponsor the *Telegram & Gazette* and the DCU Center – organizations that work with us on multiple events and fronts. Sandy Dunn, the DCU Center General Manager, has served as Chairman of our Board and as an active member of our Executive Committee for many years.

Finally, Worcester is very fortunate to have a strong philanthropic community. The Alden Trust, Daniels, Ellsworth, Fletcher, Fuller, Harrington, Hoche-Schofield, McEvoy, Stoddard, and Wyman-Gordon Foundations, The Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, and the Greater Worcester Community Foundation have supported our efforts over the years and have ensured that Worcester is the smallest region in the nation to boast a local public policy research organization. These organizations represent the legacy of civic involvement that even today empowers the Worcester community.

Thank you, each and every one of you, for your commitment to our organization and our mission. We value the trust you have placed in our efforts and our impact. We will continue to work hard to earn it.