Green Apple Linen cleaning things up in former tire shop
High-tech commercial laundry venture blends efficiency with environmental sustainability

OUTGOING BRPC CHIEF REFLECTS ON 24-YEAR TENURE

Since 1994, Nat Karns has been directly engaged in many county issues as executive director of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC). Now he is about to step down from that high-profile position.

Karns has served as the second executive director of BRPC, which was established in 1966. He succeeded the organization’s founding director, Karl Heckler.

Last year, Karns announced his intention to retire. Since then, he has been continuing to direct the organization, while helping to select a successor and prepare for a transition in leadership.

After an extensive national search process, the commission chose Thomas Matuszko — who has been a staff member of BRPC since 1997 and assistant director since 2001 — to succeed Karns. That change in leadership is slated to take place following formal confirmation of Matuszko’s appointment by BRPC in mid-May. Karns will officially retire on May 23.

BRPC is the state-sanctioned regional planning agency for Berkshire County. It assists the 32 Berkshire cities and towns with comprehensive planning, data and information, technical assistance, funding support and other services.

It deals with a variety of topics and issues including community and economic development, emergency preparedness, the environment, energy, regional services, education and transportation, among others.

In addition to specific projects, BRPC prepares annual and semi-annual comprehensive regional plans.

Outgoing BRPC Executive Director Nat Karns (left) is joined by his longtime associate and soon-to-be-successor Tom Matuszko in the organization’s downtown Pittsfield offices. Karns, who will officially retire on May 23, reflects on his 24-year tenure with the BRPC in an interview with BERKSHIRE TRADE & COMMERCE.

Agency’s evolution leads to more services reaching broader range of clients

BY BRAD JOHNSON

To be fair about it, coming up with a name that concisely reflects the range of services that Rich Wisenflue’s organization handles would be a tall order.

So, since its incorporation in 1994, the agency operating officially as Berkshire Family and Individual Resources Inc. has been known chiefly by its easier to say but harder to decipher acronym of BFAIR.

“Yes, it’s a name that doesn’t give people much of an idea about what we do,” said Wisenflue, who has worked for the nonprofit human services agency for most of its history, including the past 17 years as its executive director. “But it is readily recognizable and easy to remember, so I suppose it does have its merits.

The BFAIR name is indeed becoming more widely known and recognized in the region as the organization continues on a growth track that has positioned it as one of the leading employers in northern Berkshire County.

With headquarters in North Adams and a satellite administrative office in Pittsfield, BFAIR operates a growing number of programs that assist the 32 Berkshire cities and towns in many county issues.

Executive Director Rich Wisenflue joins Melanie Moran, BFAIR’s dedicated recruiter, during a new employee orientation session in early April at its main office in North Adams. Wisenflue notes that BFAIR has seen double-digit job growth in each of the last 10 years, bringing current employment above the 325 mark.

ON THE RECORD

Outgoing BRPC executive director reflects on 24-year tenure

BY JOHN TOWNES

In addition to investing in local properties, Steve Oakes has now branched out into the laundry business.

Oakes, a resident of Otis, has acquired several commercial properties in Pittsfield, Lee, Lenox and Great Barrington over the past few years, including his purchase of the Shipton Building in downtown Pittsfield for $2.15 million earlier this year (see related story on page 18).

That high-profile purchase was preceded last October by a much quieter acquisition involving a former Tire Warehouse shop at 316 West Street in Pittsfield (across from the Barker Road junction). There Oakes has teamed up with Milltown Capital, a private impact investment firm based in Pittsfield, on a new high-tech commercial linen laundry operation that emphasizes economy, efficiency and environmental sustainability.

The venture, called Green Apple Linen, is expected to open in mid-April.

“It looks like a NASA installation,” said Oakes in an early April interview. “It’s a computer-controlled system and is connected to the Internet to monitor everything.”
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lighting installation for an office building at 100 North St. (February 2018 BT&C). One of the goals of Berkshire Lightscapes is to encourage owners of buildings in the city center to install this type of lighting at their properties. Hammerling noted that several downtown property owners have expressed interest in purchasing lighting systems for their own buildings.

The current fund drive is oriented to placing artistic illumination in public spaces, including Park Square, City Hall and Dunham Mall. In March, MassDevelopment, a state community development finance agency, approved a proposal Berkshire Lightscapes had submitted for a grant to fund the installation of LED lighting in those three locations. It is a matching grant in which MassDevelopment will provide money equal to what is raised by Berkshire Lightscapes from contributions, up to $50,000. The deadline is May 16.

The grant is through Commonwealth Places, a program of MassDevelopment that utilizes the crowdfunding platform Patronicity.org as a vehicle to raise matching funds for community-based projects.

Berkshire Lightscapes has a link in its website (www.berkshirelightscapes.com) to the specific Patronicity page where people can donate. If the campaign is successful, they will use the $100,000 total to purchase and install lighting at the three locations.

Hammerling emphasized that no city funds are involved in the project.

“We’re collaborating closely with the city government on the planning for this to make sure it is the right lighting and fits in with their goals and requirements for safety and other factors,” he said. “But this does not involve any tax money from the city budget.”

Hammerling explained that the lighting would brighten up these areas and, through strategic placement, highlight their features.

He said the specific lighting features will be designed after the funds have been raised, but they could include lighted walkways, memorial lighting to highlight the statue there, and uplighting on the trees.

“It will be eye-catching and noticeably different, but it will also be subtle,” he said. “It won’t be flashy or distracting to traffic.”

The lighting at Dunham Mall and City Hall would serve several purposes, Hammerling said. “It would create interesting connections from North Street to Dunham Mall and City Hall,” he said.

Dunham Mall is a pedestrian walkway between North and Allen streets leading to City Hall. “In the daytime, a lot of people use Dunham Mall, but at night it’s largely empty,” he said. “A corridor of enhanced light would make it more inviting and safer at night.”

The lighting at City Hall would both enhance the architectural beauty of the building, and allow the space in front of it to be used for outdoor entertainment and other events after dark, said Hammerling.

By mid April, the campaign had raised $20,000 – including a combination of larger corporate sponsorships from Berkshire Bank, Greylock Federal Credit Union and Milltown Capital, and individual contributions.

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End of the Book Fair: 10 a.m. to noon at BCC South County Center, 343 Main St., April 18

Announcing the winner of this year's Esther Quinn Award. 7:30 a.m., with a BerkShire Community College student. Opportunities to observe classes, informal gathering.

April 17, May 15:

At the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown by visiting professor Nina Dubin. April 17, free lecture at the Clark Art Center. For more details, visit clarkart.edu or call 413-458-2303.

April 17:

Registration deadline for Berkshire County Arc's Community’s Tina Packer Playhouse in Lenox. May 12 gala fundraiser to benefit the Fellowship Hall. No admission charge but free-will offering accepted.

May 12:

The 11th annual Three Stooges Festival, free networking event presented by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams. Thomas Institute from Fear, Freedom from Want, and Our Democracy at Risk. Individuals and organizations are invited to facilitate workshops of one or two hours. For more information, contact Becky Meier at 413-637-4989 or berkshirevmc@bcarc.org.

May 12, 13:

For more information, visit mclab.edu or call 413-586-2278.

May 13:

Food Access, part of a series of monthly community education forums on sustainability. From the advantages of service and resource organizations throughout the Berkshires, to residents' access to natural foods. For more information, visit post92.org or call 413-298-5252 ext. 100.

May 15:

Chamber Nite, monthly meetup group designed for entrepreneurs who want to get together in an informal setting. Group welcomes business owners, Hot Harry's, Berkshire Dream Home, Therapeutic Massage & Wellness, Ambicant Makeup, Boston Main-Line Staffing, Greater North Adams Regional Chamber of Commerce, Berkshire Dream Home, and Union Block, 395 Main St., from 5 to 7 p.m., with participating businesses offering refreshments.

May 5:

A performance for Community Access to the Arts (ATA) at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox. For more information, contact Toronto, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Union Block in Great Barrington. Donations are $10 to $20.

May 11-13:

The 3rd annual Food Stash, a weekend for artists and writers. Cost $35, $25 for museum members. To register, contact Becky Meier at berkshirevmc@bcarc.org.

May 16:

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Museum tweaks auction line-up in wake of ruling

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Just a few days after clearing the final legal hurdle concerning its plan to sell select works from its collection, the Berkshire Museum on April 10 announced a schedule for the auctioning of 13 of those works in the weeks ahead.

At the same time, museum officials made clear what can be viewed as a conciliatory gesture to the legion of local residents, museum professionals and art world insiders who have strongly opposed the deaccession plan since it was announced last summer by suggesting that the remaining two dozen or so works originally earmarked for sale may ultimately be retained by the museum.

“We recognize the strong feelings of those opposed to any sale,” said Elizabeth McGraw, president of the museum’s board of trustees, in an April 10 statement. “We are hopeful that the sale of these other 13 works will allow us to hold the remaining works that had been approved for deaccession.”

This deaccession plan was unveiled last July as part of what was cast as a “New Vision” for the museum, in which the sale of works would generate the $55 million the museum said it needs to create a sustainable endowment and fund needed renovations and repairs to its century-old building. Funds would also be used to implement new features and programs that would broaden its appeal and relevance in a contemporary context (September 2017 B&G).

After a prolonged legal skirmish involving Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey’s office and other parties, the museum and Healey’s office in late January announced a joint proposal for sale of works to proceed, with certain restrictions and conditions applied to how much money could be raised and how those funds could be used.

In conjunction with that joint proposal, the museum announced that arrangements had been made for the sale of Norman Rockwell’s Shufflin’ eton’s Barbershop to be sold to an unnamed American nonprofit museum, thus keeping the work on public display. This arrangement, which also allowed for the painting to remain on display in the Berkshires for two years before moving to the buyer’s possession, was seen as addressing a key concern of opponents that this and other works on view would wind up in private collections and no longer be accessible to the public.

The joint proposal was then submitted for final judicial review, and on April 5 Justice David Lowy of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court signed off on the plan, clearing the way for works to be auctioned.

In conjunction with the first 13 works to be sold at auction, museum officials expressed the hope that, along with the sale of Shuffleton’s Barbershop, these works will raise adequate funds for the museum’s plans.

“We are moving forward to secure the future of the Berkshire Museum,” said McGraw. “We had identified for deaccession and sale 40 works of the museum’s 40,000, protecting the vast majority of the museum’s collection. We know we can raise what the museum needs by offering for sale fewer than half of the works originally anticipated. That’s good for the museum and the community we serve.”

McGraw said the museum’s board of trustees reviewed all of the 39 works that had been approved for sale, working to protect those works of higher value to fulfilling the museum’s mission of “Bringing people together for experiences that spark creativity and innovative thinking by making inspiring educational connections among art, history, and natural science.”

The 13 selected works will be offered at Sotheby’s in auctions scheduled for May 22 and 23.

New look for Creative Resources Conference

BY JOHN TOWNES

In its third year, the Creative Resources Conference sponsored by 1Berkshire is expanding its size and scope.

The event, which grew out of the absorption of Berkshire Creative into 1Berkshire in 2015, is designed to provide business and other information for creative professionals and entrepreneurs.

This year, it is broadening its scope with activities for other types of businesses and organizations.

“We’re adding a track to also help other types of businesses and organizations to develop solutions for creative challenges,” said Jonathan Butler, executive director of 1Berkshire.

This year the event will be held April 26 at the Stationery Factory at 63 Flansburg Ave. in Dalton, a mixed-use development in a former mill building.

“The Stationery Factory has a lot more room, and we can handle more people there,” said Butler. “So, we decided to expand its focus.”

The full-day event features three sessions during the day, with three workshops and panels offered during each session. Attendees can select one of the tracks during each time period.

These include such topics as Making Money Online, Making a Move, Commercial Collaborations, and Stepping Up with Social Media, among others.

Butler said that the offerings will be a mix of subjects that will be applicable to creative professionals, as well as to other entrepreneurs and organizations.

“For example, there will be a program on successful internship programs, utilizing websites, and developing partnerships with the creative community,” he said.

They also have reduced the admission price this year to $50 for 1Berkshire members or $60 for non-members. “We have reduced it by half of what it used to be to make it more affordable and inclusive,” Butler said.

The event will feature a keynote presentation by Rebecca West and Greg Remmy, founders of Devour Media, a nationally prominent food-driven content studio and website. They will share their strategies for content and online development.

Check-in for the Creative Resources Conference begins at 8:30 a.m. with the first of three sessions at 9:30. Lunch is included with all tickets, which can be purchased at 1berkshire.com.

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The Pittsfield Cooperative Bank has been selected as a recipient of the First National Bank of Lanesboro’s Community Builder Equity Builder Program, which assists local homebuyers with down-payment and closing costs as well as homebuyer counseling and rehabilitation assistance. The $3.1 million program provides grants to financial institutions to assist households, at or below 80 percent of the area median income. Borrowers are eligible to receive up to $5,000 in assistance on a first-come, first-served basis. Buyers must also complete a homebuyer counseling program. “We are pleased to offer this financial assistance to help ease some of the challenges associated with purchasing a home,” said Michael Barbieri, the bank’s senior vice president for residential and commercial lending. “Home ownership is key to building wealth, and said the bank’s financial counseling and programs that assist homebuyers are a critical component in our communities continue to thrive.” The Pittsfield Cooperative Bank is eligible to receive up to $10,000 in 2018 through the program. For more information, contact Barb at 413-629-1610.

The Stockbridge Library, Museum & Archives is partnering with Berkshire Theatre Group to present a free exhibit entitled “Berkshire Theatre Through the Eras.” Featuring photographs, letters, posters, prop costumes, and other ephemera, the exhibit will run through April 30 on and is view through June 30 at the library during normal operating hours. It is housed in the historic Hildreth building, which was formerly known as Stockbridge History, in the lower level of the Library. The exhibit is the result of the joint effort of the exhibit, Kate Maguire, artist director, and curator of the library’s Proctor Museum & Archives, and Hildreth. The exhibit highlights the history of Berkshire Theatre through its impact on the community, its cultural significance, and its financial contributions to the town. The deadline for applications is April 30.

Goodwill Industries of the Berkshires has received a $1,000 grant from the Pittsfield Co- Operative Bank’s Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). The funds will be used to support the organization’s mission to assist people with disabilities through employment and training. The grant will be used to fund several programs that focus on helping people with disabilities find employment.

The City of Pittsfield was awarded the Distinguished Budget Presentation Award for the completion of its FY 18 annual budget by the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada (GFOA). Along with this award, Finance Director Matthew Kerwood received a Certificate of Recognition for his work toward the development of the budget presentation. The award reflects the commitment of the city to providing timely and accurate budget presentation. These categories are designed to assess how well the City of Pittsfield serves as a document, policy plan, financial operations, and communications document. Mayor Linda experts said the process is important in the presentation of the City’s dedication to high professional standards. This program is designed to support the city’s ability to present its budget in a way that is clear, comprehensive, and transparent.

On his visit to Berkshire County in mid March, U.S. Congressman Richard Neal met with representatives from Greylock Federal who discussed the massachusetts system of states and the need for assistance in communities served by Berkshire County. The meeting was held to discuss the potential for the bank to invest in the community by providing grants to support the needs of local organizations. Greylock Federal originally pursued the CDFI grant funds to supplement roll-out of its Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) program which recently granted funds can help the recipients take their operations to the next level. Berkshire County Farm Bureau is attached to a million and a half dollars in the community and 80% of the funding will be distributed to local organizations. Greylock Federal will use the CDFI grant funds to support small business and social purpose organizations that are located in Berkshire County and 80% of the funding will be distributed to local organizations.

Berkshire Bank Foundation has announced a new grant opportunity to help meet the evolving needs of nonprofit organizations in communities served by Berkshire Bank. Through the Capacity Building Grant RFP, the foundation is inviting proposals that seek to build the capacity of nonprofit organizations by providing funds for a variety of activities that will improve the organization’s performance and impact. If selected, the organization will be eligible for a grant of $50,000. Capacity building may be used to bring a nonprofit to the threshold of full sustainability, or to support organizational sustainability, or to promote organizational sustainability. Program examples include support for organizational development and capacity building, management and administration training, preparing for a capital campaign, or engaging in a quality stay for all of our guests.” In recognition of these achievements, the hotel will receive a plaque from the Goodwill Industries of the Berkshires has received a $1,000 grant from the Pittsfield Co-Operative Bank’s Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). The funds will be used to support the organization’s mission to assist people with disabilities through employment and training. The grant will be used to fund several programs that focus on helping people with disabilities find employment.
BCC announces 2018 40 Under Forty awardees
Berkshire Community College (BCC), in partnership with 1Berkshire and the Berkshire Eagle, hosted the 3rd annual Berkshire County 40 Under Forty Awards on March 29 at Berkshire Plaza. The event, which raises funds to support a variety of initiatives at BCC, recognizes young professionals who are excelling in their industries through their leadership and involvement in their communities.

The Community Development Corporation of Southwestern Massachusetts (CDCSB) received a $10,000 allocation of Community Investment Tax Credits in the amount of $1,000 from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to increase the financial success of CDCSB's Energy Loan Fund, which provides affordable energy efficiency loans.

Visit BCC — This Spring!
Learn everything you need to know about Berkshire Community College. www.berkshirecc.edu/openhouse

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news & notes from the region

The Law of Office of Emily Zelevnik marked continuing its first year of operation in April. Emily Zelevnik (formerly Emily Harrigan) is a Barrington native who returned to the Berkshires after studying and practicing law in the Boston area. In 2017 she opened an office for her solo law practice (www.zelevniklaw.com) at 126 Main St. in Great Barrington, where she focuses on real estate, wills and estate planning, and business services.

Greylock Federal Credit Union outlined its 2017 financial results at its 83rd annual meeting, held on March 27. In its 82nd year of operation, Greylock Federal’s core operating earnings were increased by $6.7 million, up from $4.7 million the prior year. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion. The credit union’s regulatory capital ended the year at 10.30 percent, up from 9.94 percent in 2016, and total assets increased by $7.0 million, up from $6.7 million in 2016, to total assets of about $1.16 billion.
To facilitate energy upgrades that can create a more sustainable building envelope, the Ruffer describes the PACE program as a crucial financing tool. PACE enables the property owner to undertake energy upgrades with payback periods of up to 20 years. The program allows property owners to access affordable, long-term financing and eliminates upfront costs. Energy Resources will administer the program.

The statewide program is authorized by the Massachusetts Clean Energy and Community Investment Act (2016) and aims to promote the use of energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. PACE offers a proven, cost-effective way to provide funding for energy upgrades and has been adopted by 23 states and the District of Columbia.

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) has received a $15,000 grant from the American Cancer Society in support of “Tobacco-Free MCLA,” a project developed to create a 100 percent tobacco-free policy across the campus within one year. MCLA has approved a tobacco-free policy, taking effect this fall, which will prohibit smoking and other tobacco use on all property owned or operated by the college. This policy is intended to reduce the health risks related to second-hand smoke, as well as other adverse effects of smoke and other tobacco use. The project is being managed by an implementation team of MCLA faculty, staff, and students, who will carry out activities to inform its 100 percent tobacco-free policy.

By adding Medicare to our portfolio, we have earned specialized licenses, which means that many of our agents have been with us from the beginning,” Segala noted. She added that several others have been with the company for over 10 years. Segala said the strength and consistency of her team has been a contributing factor in leading Steepleview Realty to a leading position in Berkshire County, including several years where it has been the top agency in terms of closed sales. Steepleview has also been voted “Best of The Berkshires” numerous times over the years in the Berkshire Eagle’s annual readers’ poll.

The Berkshires Taconic Community Foundation awarded $6.5 million in grants and scholarships in 2017, an increase of over $500,000 from 2016. The foundation distributed an additional $6.7 million to over 50 non-profits with whom they partner in stewarding financial resources used to build healthy and vibrant communities. Individuals, school and non-profits in Berkshire, northwest Litchfield, Columbia and northeast Dutchess counties received grants in a variety of interest areas, including $2.5 million for education, $1.6 million for health and human services, $1.1 million for arts and culture, and $1.1 million for civic, environmental and religious activities. New and existing donors contributed a total of $15.7 million in gifts in 2017. Those gifts, combined with asset growth through the 2017, an increase of over $500,000 from 2016. The foundation has awarded $6.5 million in grants and scholarships in 2017, an increase of over $500,000 from 2016.
Startup competition focuses on business models that leverage existing arts assets

April 30 deadline for applications to new Arts Enterprise Challenge

BY BRAD JOHNSON

A tidy sum of $25,000 awaits the winner of the North Adams Arts Enterprise Challenge, a new entrepreneurial startup competition that will be unfolding in the months to come.

Along with the cash award, the winning startup will also gain valuable ongoing assistance from Lever Inc., a North Adams-based incubator that for the past four years has been developing programs and resources to support high-growth-potential ventures in the region.

As suggested by its name, the focus of the North Adams Arts Enterprise Challenge (NAAEC) is on ventures with business models that specifically leverage existing arts assets in the region, with the underlying goal of attracting and developing new arts-related enterprises within the northern Berkshire cultural economy.

“As Lever looks to strengthen the region’s economy by attracting young businesses with great potential, we expect the Challenge’s focus on arts assets will give entrepreneurs a possible spot by the time they get to the pitch competition,” he said. That pitch competition will be held Aug. 9 at the Greylock Works multi-use mill redevelopment project in North Adams. “A portion of Demo Day will be dedicated to the challenge,” said Filson, noting that the event will be open to the public.

A panel of business experts will be tasked with selecting the winner of the $25,000 award, which Filson said has been donated by local philanthropic interests.

In conjunction with the cash award, the winning startup will enter a four-month incubation program at Lever, where it will focus on development and implementation of the business model.

While there is no cash award for other finalists, Filson noted that they also stand to benefit from the competition process. “The reward is that they get access to mentorship through the workshops, access to angel investors, and a high-profile platform to pitch their concept,” he said. Some finalists may also be offered access to Lever’s incubation resources.

Filson said that applications to the NAAEC may come from outside the region, although he anticipates that most will come from within the immediate Berkshire region.

“If I’m confident that we’ll get strong applicants for this first challenge,” he said, adding that the NAAEC is expected to become an annual event.

Filson noted that similar challenges are being considered for other business sectors, such as advanced manufacturing and health care. “We would like to have at least one more challenge by the end of the year,” he said.

Ahead of the April 30 application deadline, Lever is holding an information session for potential NAAEC competitors on April 19 at 5 p.m. For additional information, contact Filson at 413-884-3276 or billson@lever.org. 

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spotlight on new business ventures

Startup competition focuses on business models that leverage existing arts assets

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“As Lever looks to strengthen the region’s economy by attracting young businesses with great potential, we expect the Challenge’s focus on arts assets will give entrepreneurs a possible spot by the time they get to the pitch competition,” he said. That pitch competition will be held Aug. 9 at the Greylock Works multi-use mill redevelopment project in North Adams. “A portion of Demo Day will be dedicated to the challenge,” said Filson, noting that the event will be open to the public.

A panel of business experts will be tasked with selecting the winner of the $25,000 award, which Filson said has been donated by local philanthropic interests.

In conjunction with the cash award, the winning startup will enter a four-month incubation program at Lever, where it will focus on development and implementation of the business model.

While there is no cash award for other finalists, Filson noted that they also stand to benefit from the competition process. “The reward is that they get access to mentorship through the workshops, access to angel investors, and a high-profile platform to pitch their concept,” he said. Some finalists may also be offered access to Lever’s incubation resources.

Filson said that applications to the NAAEC may come from outside the region, although he anticipates that most will come from within the immediate Berkshire region.

“If I’m confident that we’ll get strong applicants for this first challenge,” he said, adding that the NAAEC is expected to become an annual event.

Filson noted that similar challenges are being considered for other business sectors, such as advanced manufacturing and health care. “We would like to have at least one more challenge by the end of the year,” he said.

Ahead of the April 30 application deadline, Lever is holding an information session for potential NAAEC competitors on April 19 at 5 p.m. For additional information, contact Filson at 413-884-3276 or billson@lever.org. 

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Lenox native uses hops crop in new kind of beverage

BY JOHN TOWNES

The increasing number of hops growers in the region are usually associated with the production of craft beers.

However, Lenox native Alex Olchowski has developed a new product for the hops he grows.

His business produces Hop2o, a non-alcoholic sparkling soda. Hop2o is made from a mix of extract from whole cone Nugget and Cascade hops, a small amount of guava nectar for sweetness and organic lemon and lime juice.

The beverage is made with water from a spring just over the border in the village of New Lebanon Springs, N.Y.

Many years ago, the healthful properties of the water from Lebanon Springs was the basis of a popular spa resort in the town of New Lebanon. Although the spa has long-since closed, the hillside site still has a roadside pipe which is popular as a public source of free spring water.

Olchowski has been growing hops for about five years on a 1.3-acre field at Spring Hill Farm, a family property where he lives nearby. The property has a well that taps the spring water.

He noted that he came up with the idea for Hop2o as a result of his combined experience in the restaurant industry, including a long-term job at the former Pearl’s in Great Barrington.

“I was selling the hops to craft-beer makers, and decided I wanted to produce something myself,” Olchowski said. “There are already hundreds of great craft beers out there, so I wanted to do something different.

One day I was thinking about the hops and the spring water and had a vision for a new non-alcoholic healthful drink.”

His website (www.hop2osoda.com) describes the taste of Hop2o as “an initial blast of citrus followed by a dry pine finish.”

“Some people have said it tastes like a cross between kombucha and ginger beer, without the bite,” Olchowski said. “Others have compared it to lemon soda like the old Fresca, or lemonade.”

FD&As regulations prohibit claims of specific medicinal properties for such products, but the enzymes in hops have been attributed to aiding digestion and having anti-oxidant properties. The spring water is also rich in minerals including calcium, iron, zinc, and magnesium.

Although Hop2o is non-alcoholic, Olchowski said it has mildly sedative qualities. “It’s calming, and some people drink it before bed to help them get to sleep,” he said.

To produce the soda, he takes the hops, stone-carbonated spring water and other ingredients to Chatham Brewing in Chatham, N.Y., where they are mixed together and bottled. He also uses a commercial kitchen to prepare the mix.

He explained there are several differences between manufacturing the soda and brewing beer. The primary one is that the soda is bottled quickly, rather than going through the fermenting process with yeast that produces the alcoholic content of beer.

Olchowski launched the business in December 2016. He basically operates it himself, handling the hop-growing, marketing and business operations with one part-time assistant. He has also contracted with Marty’s Local, a business based in Richmond that provides marketing and distribution support for regional growers and food enterprises.

Olchowski holds occasional tasting events for Hop2o at local outlets. Upcoming tastings include April 27 at both Big Y in Lee and Wild Oats in Williamstown, and April 28 at Gudo’s in Great Barrington. All are from 2 to 6 p.m.

For financing, Olchowski worked with Berkshire Agricultural Ventures (July 2017 RT&C) and has several investors.

So far, Hop2o (518-860-3804) has lined up about 40 sales outlets in an area extend- ing from Brattleboro, Vt., to Saratoga, N.Y., down to New York City and over to Boston.

Its retail and food service outlets in Berkshire County include Wild Oats Market in Williamstown, the Marketplace Cafe in Great Barrington, and Gudo’s Fresh Market in Great Barrington. It is also sold in select Big Y supermarkets.

Hop2o is also sold online at its website in quantities of four to 12 bottles at $2 per bottle plus shipping.

Olchowski holds occasional tasting events for Hop2o at local outlets. Upcoming tastings include April 27 at both Big Y in Lee and Wild Oats in Williamstown, and April 28 at Gudo’s in Great Barrington. All are from 3 to 6 p.m.

While sales for Hop2o were a relatively modest $10,000 in his first year, Olchowski said that fits within his anticipated trajectory for the business.

“My business plan has been to keep it focused and have a small footprint, and gradually grow it,” he said. “Then, in about three to five years, if the business goes well, we’ll look to a larger company to sell to or form a partnership to take it national.”

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The Clark Art Institute has named Thomas Woodward to serve as chief advancement officer, leading the Clark’s philanthropy and membership programs. Woodward is a seasoned fundraising professional, bringing more than 20 years of experience in strategic planning and advancement for museums, higher education, and the federal government to his new role at the Clark. He comes to the Clark from the Harvard Art Museums, where he served as director of institutional advancement.

Berkshire Bank has announced the appointment of Tonya Haas as vice president and wealth advisor, responsible for client relationship management, trust administration, and new business development. Haas began her banking career in the Berkshires 26 years ago, and spent 16 of those years at Berkshire Bank as a trust officer, administering and retaining trust investment relationships for the group. Before returning to the bank in her new position at the 25 Main St. office in Lenox, Haas served as client relationship manager for Alexandra East Capital Management.

Ashley Daughtery has joined Gala Restaurant at Orchards Hotel in Williamstown as the food and beverage manager. Daughtery brings a wealth of hospitality knowledge to the position, including an expertise in craft cocktails as well as beer and wine. She began her hospitality career as a hostess at attending Southern Vermont College in Bennington. She has worked in the Williamstown area for the past 15 years, most recently holding positions at Purple Pub and Hops & Vines.

Brenda Burdick, senior manager of marketing and public relations at General Dynamics Mission Systems, has been appointed by Gov. Charlie Baker to the board of trustees of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA). Burdick joined General Dynamics in Pittsfield in 1995, when she began work at General Dynamics Advanced Information Systems. In 2002, she became the marketing and public relations manager for General Dynamics Mission Systems, before she assumed the position of senior manager of marketing and public relations for the company in 2014. From 2008 to 2017, Burdick was a member of the Berkshire United Way board of directors, serving as its chairperson from 2013 to 2015. She was also a member of the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce board of directors since 2009 and currently serves as an executive committee member of IBerkshire. Cross Insurance (formerly known as Barwell, Bowley & Karam and Col Insurance agencies) has announced that Jackie Dolan Kelly has earned her designation as an accredited advisor in insurance. A third-generation insurance professional, Dolan Kelly holds a Property and Casualty Insurance license, and has successfully completed the commercial lines coursework through Liberty Mutual.

Donna Hassler, executive director of Cheshire Medical Center, has been named a Five Star Professional Award winner for 2018, the fifth consecutive year she has received this award. To receive the Five Star Professional Award, a professional must satisfy objective eligibility and evaluation criteria that are associated with mortgage professionals who provide quality services to their clients. Burke’s banking career continues, her first position since 2001, and she has been a top performer in new direct deposit spending on film and television production to the commonwealth. In 2011 he was appointed executive director of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. During his six-year tenure, the council awarded thousands of grants totaling close to $100 million in support of Garden State artists and arts organizations.

Carlo Zaffanella and Julia Bowen have been appointed to the board of trustees of Berkshire Community College. Zaffanella is the vice president and general manager of the Maritime & Strategic Systems business at General Dynamics Mission Systems in Pittsfield. He also serves on the board of Soldier On and the Naval Submarine League. Previously, he was the executive director of Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter Public School in Adams. Her work in the community includes being the founding chair for Lever for Inc, and a member of the board of Northern Berkshire United Way, and Massachusetts Charter Public School Association.

Berkshire County Arc (BCArc) has announced the promotion of Shaun Hall to director of staff development and training. Hall has been at the BC Arc for 18 years, where he has served as an employment and training specialist. He currently manages opportunities for people with disabilities and, most recently as staff development specialist, where his focus was to standardize the training throughout the agency and where he was instrumental in creating training opportunities for people in becoming part of the western Massachusetts region. The organization was created in June 2016 by merger of four countywide economic development organizations: the Berkshire Economic Development Corporation, the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, the Berkshire Visitors Bureau, and the Berkshire Creative Economy Council.

Spring Burke, vice president, mortgage-advising director at Salisbury Bank, has been named a Five Star Mortgage Professional in 2018, the fifth consecutive year she has received this award. To receive the Five Star Mortgage Professional award, a professional must satisfy objective eligibility and evaluation criteria that are associated with mortgage professionals who provide quality services to their clients. Burke’s banking career continues, her first position since 2001, and she has been a top performer in new direct deposit spending on film and television production to the commonwealth. In 2011 he was appointed executive director of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. During his six-year tenure, the council awarded thousands of grants totaling close to $100 million in support of Garden State artists and arts organizations.

Donna Haskler, executive director of Chester County Community Foundation, has been named a Five Star Professional Award winner for 2018, the fifth consecutive year she has received this award. To receive the Five Star Professional Award, a professional must satisfy objective eligibility and evaluation criteria that are associated with mortgage professionals who provide quality services to their clients. Burke’s banking career continues, her first position since 2001, and she has been a top performer in new direct deposit spending on film and television production to the commonwealth. In 2011 he was appointed executive director of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. During his six-year tenure, the council awarded thousands of grants totaling close to $100 million in support of Garden State artists and arts organizations.
Christina Wynne, district manager of the Berkshire Children and Families (BCF) office in Pittsfield, has been appointed to serve on the board of directors of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts (NAMI). Wynne has been with BCF for more than 13 years and will work closely with President and CEO Colleen Stein to promote the well-being of children and families affected by mental illnesses; and advocates to ensure that all persons affected by mental illnesses receive, in a timely manner, the services that they need and deserve.

Andrew Gerber, MD, PhD, medical director/Ceo at Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, has been appointed to the board of directors of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts (NAMI Mass). This appointment reaffirms Gerber’s commitment to supporting community mental health services in the state and builds on his efforts at the Austen Riggs Center to impact the mental health issues confronting society. NAMI Mass provides education, support, and advocacy to Massachusetts consumers and their families; raises public awareness and understanding of mental illnesses; and advocates to ensure that all persons affected by mental illnesses receive, in a timely manner, the services that they need and deserve.

In addition to his role at the Austen Riggs Center, Gerber is associate clinical professor in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center, associate clinical professor at the Child Study Center at Yale University, and adjunct associate professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the College of Natural Sciences at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Jonathan (Jon) Baker and Tina Dobert have joined Burnham Gold Real Estate. Baker is a Berkshire County native who has been active in construction and remodeling, giving him an informed eye for the potential in homes and for helping people achieve their real estate goals. In addition to his role with Burnham Gold, Baker owns and operates The Spirit Shop in Williamstown. Dobert, also a Berkshire native, worked for over 20 years as a real estate paralegal and is now building on that experience to assist sellers and buyers with their real estate needs. Dobert also serves as an EMT with the North Adams Ambulance Service.

Gaye Weinberger has joined Organization Ink as operations director for the Great Barrington-based firm. She brings over 20 years of experience in operations and project management, with an emphasis in the start-up environment. These skill sets will fit well with Organization Ink’s focus on assisting small businesses in initial setup and ongoing growth by creating a solid financial and operational foundation for them. Prior to joining Organization Ink, Weinberger partnered to found Child Care Center Software Inc. in Troy, N.Y., and spent 12 years with Dominion Dealer Solutions in Pittsfield, overseeing new account on-boarding, support and special project management. She and Organization Ink founder Carolann Strickling had previously worked together at Autolease in Lee, overseeing its acquisition by Dominion Enterprises.

Tom McKeon has joined MountainOne Investments as a financial advisor, bringing expertise in financial planning along with experience in working with clients in central and southern Berkshire County that will complement the company’s well-established financial planning and investment management presence in northern Berkshire County. McKeon has served investment clients throughout Berkshire County and beyond for nearly 10 years. He is a Certified Financial Planner (CFP) practitioner and holds the Chartered Financial Consultant (ChFC) and Chartered Life Underwriter (CLU) designations.
specialized residences for individuals with a range of disabilities throughout Berkshire County and into the neighboring Pioneer Valley. These are augmented by various programs and services that are provided by BFAIR in other settings and for other constituencies, including its recent expansion into home care and assistance for elderly residents.

These combined services and operations now account for more than 325 jobs in the region, according to Wisenflue. “For every year over the last 10 years, we have had double-digit growth,” he noted.

That growth, Wisenflue added, has come across all staffing sectors, from entry-level certified nursing assistant and home care positions to those requiring advanced professional and clinical credentials. And filling these new positions—as well as vacancies created by staff turnover—has become a job in itself, with a dedicated recruiter and expanded HR department needed to handle the 1,200 or so applications BFAIR fields in a given year.

“It has caused us to respond with growth in that department as well,” said Wisenflue. “Recruitment and retention will continue to be challenges for us going forward.”

The growth of BFAIR and its operations is taking place within the context of its overall mission, which, as described on its website (www.bfair.org), is “to enrich the lives of people of all ages and abilities by providing positive life experiences and advocacy through distinctive, individualized, quality services.”

In its current form, BFAIR’s operations are supported by an annual budget of over $14 million, a large portion of which is administered through the state’s Department of Developmental Services. The agency is overseen by a nine-member board of directors, led by its current chair, Alex Kastrinakis. “We’re a very supportive board, but also a very careful board,” said Kastrinakis, an independent financial advisor by profession, who has served on the BFAIR board for four years, including the past year as chair.

He noted that, from the board’s perspective, the agency’s ongoing expansion has been gauged in terms of how well it matches both its mission and operational capacities. “Our mission is clearly defined, the employees and staff perform at an exceptional level, our clients are very well cared for, and we are financially secure,” Kastrinakis said. “These strengths, and the strength of Rich Wisenflue’s management team, are what give us the security and confidence to support the expansion opportunities they have brought forward.”

Agency’s origins

Wisenflue heads a management team of 14 professionals with responsibility for agency-wide internal operations as well as BFAIR’s growing range of specific programs and services. “It has become a much more diverse organization over the years,” said Wisenflue. “We reach a lot more people in a lot of different ways today compared to when we started.”

Leaving behind its earlier roots as part of an organization known as the Center for Humanistic Change, BFAIR was incorporated in 1994 as an independent, nonprofit organization. “At its origins, BFAIR was focused 100 percent on serving people with intellectual disabilities,” said Wisenflue, who from 1994 to 1996 served as director of employment services before leaving the agency temporarily for another position.

Originally based in Pittsfield, and with a satellite office in North Adams, BFAIR in its early years primarily operated residential homes for individuals with intellectual disabilities, which was soon augmented by a day habilitation program that offered individualized services for adults with disabilities.

Wisenflue, who returned to BFAIR in 2000 as associate executive director and soon after was named to lead the agency, said a higher concentration of clients in the northern Berkshires prompted a shift of its operational base to North Adams in 2002. “We had an opportunity to bring our management team to a location where the greatest number of people were being served,” he explained.

For the next several years BFAIR operated from leased space at 85 Main St. in downtown North Adams, and its services continued to focus on residences, day habilitation programs and employment services for adults with intellectual disabilities.

In 2007, the agency relocated its administrative offices and day habilitation program to a vacant commercial building at 771 South Church St. that previously had been home to a healthcare provider. “Our space downtown had become inadequate as we had grown, and when the opportunity to lease the Church Street building came up, we saw it as a good fit for us,” said Wisenflue. A few years later, he added, the agency opted to purchase the property.

BFAIR also established a satellite office in Pittsfield, where it offered individual and family support services that office today operates at 39 Willis St.

Wisenflue noted that a variety of factors contributed to the growth in demand for residential placements and related services. Key among them was a gradual statewide shift away from the institutional model that had become entrenched over the second half of the 20th century. “The onset of de-institutionalization created a demand for community integrated settings,” he said.

The corresponding increase in state funding for those services led to a growth in the number of agencies such as BFAIR and bolstered the development of new group residences, shared living arrangements and supported apartments.

With that shift toward community-based services, BFAIR has since expanded to eight residences in Berkshire County that serve adults with intellectual disabilities. (The agency is currently working on its newest group home on Woolcock Road in Williamstown, which will replace an existing BFAIR home in Clarksburg.) Over time it has also enhanced its range of services geared toward in-home care and support.

Another factor that impacted BFAIR’s operations and services was the surge in awareness and diagnosis of autism and related conditions over the past few decades. “When the diagnosis of people with autism began to grow, that created a demand for services that we felt we were in a position to provide,” said Wisenflue.

This also prompted the agency’s expansion into clinical services, in conjunction with a pilot program in 2009 with the North Adams Public Schools. Through this program, funded in part by an allocation from the Northern Berkshire United Way, BFAIR’s newly established Clinical Department offered support for students with autism attending schools in the Berkshires and southern Vermont.

“That expansion into clinical services certainly added to our clinical staff and changed the profile of our employment base,” said Wisenflue.

In addition to providing clinical support for North Adams Public Schools, the Clinical Department staff members also provide training and related assistance to school staff, family members and other service providers. More recently, these operations have extended further to include in-home applied behavioral analysis services for children diagnosed with autism.

The next major expansion for BFAIR came in 2014 when the agency established its first residence for adults with acquired brain injuries (ABI). Such individuals, whose injuries come about through accidents, strokes or other circumstances, generally become eligible for transition to residential settings following an initial period of care in nursing homes.

“A substantial factor in our growth has been in residential services for adults with ABI,” said Wisenflue. “Our first residence was opened in Pittsfield in 2014, and we plan to grow soon after was named to lead the agency, an
have added one additional [residence] each year since then.

These include a second residence in Pittsfield, one in West Stockbridge, and two in communities in the Pioneer Valley region, each of which accommodates four residents. “These homes are staffed intensively,” said Wisenfle, noting that they require multiple shifts to provide around-the-clock care and assistance for residents.

Kastrinakis, who noted that BFAIR had just opened its first ABH home when he joined the board, said expansion into this area was something that he and his fellow board members readily backed. “The majority of the board and Rich Wisenfle saw this as a solid opportunity for growth that really lined up well with our mission,” he said.

An expansion in a different direction took place in late 2014, when BFAIR was tapped by Elder Services of Berkshire County Inc. to provide in-home care services for older adults in the communities it serves.

“Elder Services had a specific need to meet in Berkshire County, and we had the capability to provide these services,” said Wisenfle.

These services – which include assistance with both medical and home care needs – are provided by licensed practical nurses, certified nursing assistants and home makers.

Wisenfle noted that more than 40 new jobs have been created since BFAIR began this home-care program, which in 2017 served some 170 clients throughout Berkshire County. “We expect this program to continue to grow as demand for in-home care services increases,” he said.

In general, Wisenfle added, there continues to be growth potential in most of the services that BFAIR currently offers. This includes new variations on some of these services, such as a current trend toward self-directed services and care for adults with disabilities by family members within their own home.

One area that has become more of a challenge for BFAIR has been its employment services program, in which the agency works with local employers to provide job opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

“Finding employers is always a challenge,” he said, noting that there is often a reluctance to take on individuals as part of a company’s payroll (as opposed to providing work on a contract basis).

He added, however, that there are some businesses and organizations that consistently support BFAIR’s program. “The City of North Adams, in particular, has continued to provide job opportunities for people here,” he said.

One highly visible example of collaboration with the city was the June 2016 opening of Snack Attack, a seasonal concession stand on Windsor Lake that is staffed by individuals in BFAIR’s Employment Services program.

Community connection

Wisenfle noted that Snack Attack and other job placement situations are an important part of BFAIR’s broader effort to make connections between the agency, its clients and the community. “It has always been a goal of mine for BFAIR to be a community partner,” he said.

“We are very active in the community and with chambers of commerce, and we are fortunate to get great business support for our fund-raising.”

Also important, he said, is support that BFAIR receives from the Berkshire legislative delegation. “Stability of our funding is always something we watch very closely,” he said. “They all do what they can to lobby on our behalf, and it is great to have them in our corner.”

These issues and other developments at BFAIR will be on the agenda at the organization’s annual meeting, which is slated for April 27 at Berkshire Hills Country Club in Pittsfield (see calendar listing on page 4).

Wisenfle noted that the event provides a high-profile opportunity to recognize the accomplishments of individual staff members, and the important support and contributions provided by others within the community.

This year’s meeting will include recognition of former North Adams Mayor Richard Alcombright as community partner of the year, and a keynote speech by advocate and photographer Chris May, a young man living with Down Syndrome who offers a positive outlook on life that transcends perceived barriers.

The event will also include an overview of the agency’s ongoing expansion by its board chairman. When asked in a late March interview to provide a preview of his address at the meeting, Kastrinakis laughingly admitted that he had not yet begun preparing his comments. “But there’s certainly no shortage of things to talk about,” he said.

Kastrinakis explained that his association with BFAIR originally came about by way of a chance encounter with Wisenfle at a community event. “There was no prior connection or association, ironically,” he said. “Rich and I were chatting, and I expressed an interest in volunteering some time. I didn’t know it would turn into a board position.”

He noted that, like many people in the broader community, he previously had only a vague concept of what BFAIR was and did.

“As I learned more about it, I saw that it was a great organization with a great mission,” Kastrinakis said. “As a board member, I have enjoyed supporting both BFAIR and its mission, and I have become very attached to them over the years.”
Opening of Casa Lina brings two new dining options to Williamstown

Northern Italian emphasis for formal setting, with tapas menu for casual side

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Make no mistake: Melahat Karakaya has no intention of shifting away from her role and responsibilities as general manager of The Porches Inn in North Adams, a position she has held since 2011. But, when an attractive opportunity to take on a new restaurant venture in neighboring Williamstown arose recently, she was ready to take on the additional challenge.

“I work at The Porches full time, and that was my main job,” said Karakaya in a late March interview, just a few weeks before the anticipated mid-April opening of Casa Lina, her new restaurant at 16 Water St. “I’m going to be the owner at Casa Lina, but there will be other really good people running things there for me.”

Among those who may lend a hand is her husband, Fahri Karakaya, who operates his own restaurant, Pera Mediterranean Bistro, a block away on Spring Street. In fact, Pera is also giving up its own head chef and sous chef to oversee the kitchen and other operations at Casa Lina. “Our executive chef, Anthony Vallone, is coming over from Pera where he’s been for the past few years,” said Karakaya. She noted that he hails originally from northern Italy, a region that will also serve as the main focus of cuisine at Casa Lina’s formal dining room.

On the other hand, sous-chef Jose Carlos Huaasaquiche brings a Hispanic heritage to the mix. That will play a role in the casual side of restaurant’s operation, which will feature a selection of tapas – or small plates – along with other fare. While these two dining formats may seem like an odd mix to have under one roof, there are ample precedent for the dichotomy.

Changes in the business partnership and staffing, along with other factors, led Hops & Vines owner Gil Rubenstein to close the restaurant last December. Before that happened, however, he had begun marketing the business to potential buyers, a process that captured Karakaya’s attention.

“We started talking about it last October,” said Karakaya. “Hops & Vines did pretty well when they were in town. But [Rubenstein] had a lot of other commitments in New York City and decided it was time to sell the business.”

Facilitated by Kim Burnham of Burnham Gold Real Estate, Karakaya and Rubenstein along with Karakaya’s lease negotiations and the purchase of the business assets and equipment. That was completed in January, so I can think of as ‘Lina’s House,’” she said. “Our daughter’s middle name is Lina, and we chose that for the restaurant, which we’ve conceived of as having both a formal dining area and a casual side,” she said.

“I added that, because of the space’s configuration, it made sense to keep the casual dining operation as well. “It’s really ideally suited to having both a formal dining area and a casual side,” she said.

While the fine dining area is being freshened up with some new fixtures, wall and decorations, the casual side is getting more of a makeover – including the replacement of communal picnic tables with more conventional and comfortable seating.

Pricing at Casa Lina will be in the moderate range. “It will not be too expensive for the quality that we offer,” said Karakaya. “The casual tapas bar will feature lower price points for its menu.”

Each side will have seating for about 50 guests. The fine dining side also has a small room for private parties of up to 12 guests. In warmer months there will also be outdoor seating available in the small garden area in front of the restaurant.

“Staffing at Casa Lina will range from about 15 to 20, including wait staff and bartenders for both sides of the operation,” Karakaya suggested that the proximity of Pera may allow for some occasional cross-sharing of staff between the two restaurants. “That’s something that might happen, perhaps in situations where one is much busier than the other,” she said.

The Karakayas, who originally hail from Turkey, both have extensive experience in the hospitality trade internationally and in the U.S. They came to the Berkshires in 2011 when Melahat Karakaya was brought on as a general manager at The Porches, an upscale lodging vendor adjacent to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Since their arrival here, Fahri Karakaya has been involved in various restaurant ventures, the most recent of which, Pera, has been operating since 2013.

In addition to the family dynamic in which both she and her husband now operate their own restaurants, Karakaya said their 11-year-old daughter, Ece, is also playing an important – albeit symbolic – role in the new business.

“Our daughter’s middle name is Lina, and we chose that for the restaurant, which we think of as ‘Lina’s House,’” she said.

Casa Lina (413-458-6136, www.casalinasrest.com) will initially be open six days a week for dinner only from 5 to 9 p.m. midweek and until 10 on weekends (closed Mondays). Karakaya noted that the casual side may remain open a little later on weekends, and may feature live music on those nights. After Memorial Day, the plan is to add lunch service and to be open seven days a week.
Regulating Short-Term Rentals

Lenox voters to address issue at May 3 Town Meeting

By John Townes

Like many municipalities across the Berkshires and nationwide, the town of Lenox is grappling with the impact of a new sector of the economy, with the booming number of homeowners who rent out all or part of their homes on a short-term basis through Airbnb.com and other online booking sites.

In an effort to balance the differing interests within the town, Lenox is submitting a new bylaw regulating such rentals at its upcoming Town Meeting on May 3.

The town has held extensive public meetings and discussions to balance all of the issues, according to Pam Kueber, chair of the Lenox Planning Board.

“This arose organically, as part of the planning board’s responsibility to identify and address land-use issues,” Kueber said. “We’ve had at least 23 meetings and heard from a lot of people on all sides of the issue.”

She said their goal was to balance such concerns as preserving residential neighborhoods, while enabling residents to continue to rent out rooms on a short-term basis.

“There are already bylaws that allow people to offer short-term rentals on their homes, and we wanted to enable people to earn money that way,” she said. “The question is how to do that, while also addressing the impacts and concerns raised by the marked increase in the number of short-term rentals. We have tried to find the sweet spot for that.”

Kueber explained that renting out rooms in a home is a commercial activity, even though this usually occurs in residential zones.

“Other people who bought homes in residential zones have the right not to have their neighborhood disrupted by houses that have a continual turnover of short-term renters coming and going and activity related to that,” Kueber said. “We also don’t want to see pop-up hotels in residential areas.”

There are also concerns of the operators of inns, motels and B&Bs, who have to compete with private rentals. They want to have a more level playing field in terms of regulations, fees and taxes, said Kueber.

She said there are other issues that have been raised.

“We want to ensure that housing in Lenox is as affordable and available to full-time residents as possible,” said Kueber. “One problem that other communities have experienced is an influx of outside investors who are buying up homes specifically to use them for short-term rentals. People don’t want to see that happening here, because it would reduce the supply of housing for full-time residents.”

The proposed bylaw defines a short-term rental as less than 30 days.

For short-term rentals, 60 days per year is the maximum allowed by the bylaw.

There are three types of short-term rentals addressed in the bylaw: Guest Rooms, Entire Dwellings and Accessory Dwellings such as guest cottages or attached apartments.

All short-term rental properties must be the host’s legal residence (or in the case of Accessory Dwellings, on the property of the legal owner of the principal dwelling). Registration and inspections would be required for any property to be used for short-term rentals. A Special Permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals is required for short-term rentals of entire homes.

The bylaw would also prohibit special events on short-term rental properties.

The proposed zoning bylaw would not affect seasonally house-rented at 30 days or more, which have traditionally been allowed during the summer. Longer-term rentals are covered by existing landlord-tenant regulations.

Kueber said this would set up a continuum.

“One end are single-family residences that are only used by their owners,” she said. “Then there are people who occasionally rent out rooms or the entire house on a short-term basis. That becomes a commercial use and must be registered or have a special permit, which allows short-term rentals for up to 60 days a year. At the far end are inns and B&Bs and motels, that can accommodate guests 365 days a year, and are subject to more extensive requirements.”

The town’s effort to address the issue has been controversial. Opponents or skeptics have expressed concerns that the proposed bylaw would stifle the ability of residents to earn additional income through short-term rentals, including homeowners who would otherwise have a difficult time paying the taxes and upkeep on their homes. There have also been objections to the proposed registration and Special Permit requirements as unnecessarily intrusive.

A separate issue is taxation on short-term rental income. That, however, is not addressed by this bylaw, but is likely to be affected by legislation that currently is being worked through state government aimed at the increase in short-term rentals.

The state’s House and Senate have each passed separate bills to expand the scope of registration and taxation of income from short-term rentals. They are currently working to reconcile the bills, and then pass a final version to Gov. Charlie Baker for signing.

Kueber noted that if this legislation becomes law, the issue of registration under the Lenox zoning bylaw will become moot.

Property owners who do short-term rentals will have to register with the state anyway under that new law,” she said.

The proposed bylaw will be discussed at the Planning Board’s April 24 meeting at 6 p.m. The Planning Board has also set up an information page that includes more details and a copy of the proposed bylaw at lenox-planningboard.com/short-term-rentals.
**SHIPTON BUILDING**

New owner adds site to growing portfolio in city

BY JOHN TOWNEE

Steve Oakes has gone across the street from his original North Street property to expand his holdings in downtown Pittsfield.

In January, Oakes purchased the Shipton Building at 142-156 North St. from Mory and Laurie Brenner for $1.25 million.

Oakes also owns the Crawford Square building, which contains offices and an interior arcade of storefronts, on the corner of North and Depot streets, as well as a commercial block on East Street by Park Square.

“I’d been actively looking for properties,” said Oakes, who lives in Otis. “Technically, the Shipton Building wasn’t on the market, but Kim Wilder of Bamboom Realty learned that it was quietly available and told me about it. I looked at it and made an offer.”

Oakes said the property appealed to him for several reasons. “It fits the profile of the type of building that interests me,” he said. “It’s a historic building that is in good shape but needs a little bit of TLC. It is almost fully occupied, which provides a cash flow right away and allows me to make repairs and upgrades. And I’ve become very familiar with downtown Pittsfield, and I believe in what’s happening here.”

Oakes added that he was also attracted to the building’s unique history and identity, including its distinctive Victorian brownstone facade and interior configuration.

While the purchase price may seem high for Pittsfield commercial space, Oakes noted that the market has been on an upswing. “It’s actually a modest price compared to similar properties in other places,” he said.

He added that the Shipton Building is also a value in terms of its quality and characteristics. “It’s actually like building two buildings in one,” he said.

He explained that the original four-story structure facing North Street, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, was built in 1888 by the Wollison family. It was later purchased in the early 20th century by Shipton Realty.

A separate three-story building to the rear on Renne Avenue was constructed in 1939. The two buildings were originally connected by a tunnel, which was later renovated into a corridor to unify the two structures. (See boxed on this page for additional historical details.)

Oakes said the building is structurally sound and has been well-maintained. “It’s a sturdy relic of Pittsfield’s bygone days,” he said. “Its bones are really good. I’ll do some updating and repair work on the exterior stonework, but it doesn’t require any major renovation. Most of it will be cosmetic. I want to restore its original grandeur. I’ll add some features based on old photos of it, such as awnings on the front similar to the original ones.”

Oakes noted that he is a member of the committee that is encouraging downtown property owners to install multi-colored signage to help direct visitors through its maze-like hallways.

“My main goal is to meet the needs of its tenants, and improve the experience for visitors,” he said.

The street level on North Street has several storefronts which are occupied by Abby Cutters hair stylist, Maria’s European Delicatessen, Pancho’s Mexican Restaurant, and The Garden bike, skateboard and snowboard shop.

The offices include a mix of large and small tenants. “It has a really good mix of tenants, including small entrepreneurial businesses, and professional services,” said Oakes.

Oakes is from New York City, and was previously a professional in the animation and multi-media industry, producing creative content and visual effects for television programs, advertising and logos. He established Curious Pictures Corporation. He and his wife purchased a home in Otis in the 1990s, originally as a part-time residence.

After selling his production business, he began purchasing real estate in the Berkshires, with an emphasis on historic properties. In addition to his Pittsfield buildings, the Shipton Building on North Street has been purchased for $2.15 million by a real estate investor with a growing portfolio of commercial properties in the city.

While the purchase price may seem high, it “is the sale of the time,” said Oakes, who has been on the market since 2018.

The block’s history extends back to 1809, when Abner Stevens moved a drum business from Hancock to North Street. His drums became very popular throughout the young country for use by local militias and the United States military. Stevens purchased three contiguous parcels between Fenn and Eagle streets, which is where it is believed he based his business.

The property was split up among his heirs after his death in 1842. In the 1870s his daughter Mary Helen Stevens, who had married Reuben Wollison, began to acquire the other properties, including a parcel to the east on today’s Renne Avenue.

In 1887 the Pittsfield Sun newspaper reported that she had hired noted local architect H. Neill Wilson to draw up “specifications for the grand new Wollison Block.” The paper claimed “the architectural appearance is richer than any block yet built in Pittsfield.”

Ground was broken for the new structure in 1887 and it was completed the following year. However, the opening was delayed for several weeks by the Great Blizzard Of 1888, which dumped over five feet of snow on the city over several days in March.

The building’s upstairs anchor tenant was the YMCA, located on the second floor. Other original tenants included a large photography studio, a dress maker and an agricultural supply business, among others.

In 1893, the building was sold to James Shipton. His family’s insurance and real estate firm located there, and the building was renamed.

By 1939 James Shipton built a second building behind the original block, fronting on Renne Avenue, which was rented by the Ben Franklin Print printing company. To avoid blocking delivery entrances to the original edifice, the rear structure featured a tunnel style alley right through the building.

The Shipton family owned the property into the 1970s, and then it had a succession of owners. In 1980 it experienced damage from an extensive fire. It was subsequently renovated, and the two buildings were connected into one. Some exterior sections of the building retained their original feel with exposed brick, windows and skylights. The southern wall currently adjoins a small park that was created following the demolition of the neighboring Palace Theater.

EDITOR’S NOTE: The above information and illustration were excerpted from a real estate marketing brochure for the Shipton Building.

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he owns a downtown commercial building in Lee, and the former Berkshire County Courthouse building in Lenox. Oakes divides his time between the Berkshires and his home in Brooklyn, where his wife still works. He said he has become especially focused on commercial properties in Pittsfield, and noted he takes a long view as an investor. “I want to contribute to the downtown neighborhood’s upward momentum,” he said. “I see a renaissance happening, and I like slow process, and there have been setbacks. But I have confidence in its direction. Downtown Pittsfield offers people the ability to live and work downtown and have the best of both worlds.”

Oakes said he is very satisfied with Crawford Square, which he purchased in 2014, and which also has a high occupancy level. He noted that veteran fitness instructor and trainer Aimee Marshall recently opened Berkshire Fitness Center there and has expanded from one to three spaces (February 2018 BT&C).

“It’s going well there, but I was sorry that Red Apple Butcher was not able to make a go of it,” he said, referring to a butcher and small grocery that opened and closed quickly in one of its spaces.

Oakes noted that he is actively seeking a new tenant for that space (which previously had been occupied by a long-time catering business and cafe). He hopes to bring in another operator there. “It’s fully equipped for that and is basically a turnkey space,” he said.

He said his other downtown property on East Street is also doing well. It is undergoing changes, with the recent move of Bardwell, Bowby and Kamren (BB&K) Insurance from its street level office to nearby South Street following its acquisition by Cross Insurance. However, two other adjacent tenants there, Otto’s and Designer Consigner, are expanding into the former BB&K space.

“I was sad to see BB&K leave, because they had been the major anchor there for many years,” he said. “But I’m very excited about what’s happening with Otto’s and Designer Consigner.”

Oakes said he is also on the verge of unveiling a new business venture in the city away from downtown. He, along with other partners, purchased and are renovating a former tire warehouse on West Housatonic Street, which they will operate a new commercial laundry business, Green Apple Linen (see page 9).

Beyond that, he said, he does not envision any other acquisitions in the foreseeable future, although he remains open to new opportunities. “I’ve got my hands full with these properties,” is what I will be focusing on,” he said.

Green Apple Linen continued from page 1

He said the business is primarily oriented to commercial customers by cleaning high volumes of tablecloths, sheets, towels, bath mats, curtains, napkins and other linens. Their target market includes hotels, motels, inns, resorts, spas, restaurants and other businesses and events. “We’re not a traditional neighborhood dry cleaner or laundromat,” Oakes said.

“However, we also welcome individual customers who have curtains or other linens they want to have cleaned.”

Oakes explained that Green Apple Linen is equipped with Xeros machines, a brand of ecologically sustainable commercial laundry equipment that reduces water consumption by 75 percent or more, with commensurate reductions in both energy and chemical use.

“It adds small polymer beads into the laundry, which absorb stains and soil, carrying them away from fabrics, in a process that uses less water, chemicals and power than traditional commercial washing machines. The beads are completely removed in the rinsing process and are re-usable and fully recyclable.”

“The system comes from Europe where water is a precious commodity, so they are very concerned with conserving it,” Oakes said. “We added that system also has practical benefits beyond environmental considerations. “The electricity, chemical and water costs are about half of the cost of other systems, so therefore we can offer very good prices to our customers.”

In addition to the Xeros laundering system, Oakes noted that the operation will feature other advanced equipment. This includes several automated ironers which, in less than a minute, can take a king-sized sheet, spread it out and press it over a heated roller, and then fold it up to be placed in the bin that goes back to the customer.

Oakes said they will offer pick-up and delivery service to commercial customers throughout the Berkshires. Green Apple Linen expects to serve customers that do not have their own equipment, as well as offering an alternative to in-house equipment. “We’ll do an analysis of cost comparisons between using us or doing it in-house,” Oakes said.

The business will have a staff of eight people, including management, operators and other business support. Oakes said a combination of circumstance and coincidence prompted his entry into the laundry business.

“In Crawford Square I have a basement space that has been very difficult to rent,” he said (referring to the commercial building he owns at 137 North St.). “I decided that if I can’t find a tenant, I’d put a business in there myself and become my own tenant.”

Oakes said he came upon the idea of doing a sustainable linen laundry while researching potential businesses. “I found it to be interesting,” he said.

Then he met Tim Burke, managing director at Milltown Capital.

“Milltown Capital is interested in supporting local entrepreneurial startup ventures that are environmentally sustainable and will help support economic growth here,” said Oakes. “[Burke] had made a list of possible ideas for businesses that could do well in Berkshire County. One day we were talking, and I told him I was thinking of doing a linen laundry. It turns out that a green laundry for the hospitality business was one of the ideas on his list, so we decided to work on it together as a $50-50 partnership.”

They determined, however, that the space in Crawford Square wasn’t ideally suited to a laundry operation, which led to a search for other locations.

“We did some survey of other commercial buildings,” he said. “When we saw this building on West Housatonic Street, we both instantly agreed that it was a good space for it,” he said.

However, it was far from a turnkey property. The 7,000-square-foot building had been vacant for several years and was blighted in its appearance. “Also, when we got into it, it needed a lot of work,” Oakes said. “It required a new power system, and we had to have a new water pipe installed to the main line.”

He noted that the building is structurally sound, but needed a lot of reconstruction. “It looks like it’s crumbling, but that’s just the cement outdoor walls,” he said. “From an engineering standpoint the structure is steel and is very solid. So, what we did was create new walls, and essentially constructed a new building within the original shell. Shortly, we’ll also put up a new exterior facade with custom designed panels.”

Under Green Apple Realty LLC, they purchased the building for $190,000 last October. While they don’t have a final figure on the costs of the renovation, Oakes said that they have spent about $500,000 on that so far (excluding costs for equipment).

Pittsfield architect Anthony Barnaba did the facility’s design. Other contractors include Henry Electric, Leprovost Plumbing, Heating and Cooling and Purseau Heating & Cooling.

While still decidedly ramshackle in exterior appearance, this former tire shop on West Housatonic Street is nearing completion of an interior metamorphosis into a high-tech commercial laundry operation.

“Is was a long, hard process,” Oakes said. “We had to do a lot of systems.”

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Though Birdie and Nick grew up in the Berkshires, these two Culinary Institute of America alums never really considered opening a roadside eatery.

On opening day at the Bistro Box, you can expect long lines of people eager to get their hands on tomato-basil jam, freshly-squeezed lemonade, and crispy hand-cut truffle fries. Perhaps it’s the exclusivity of their seasonal schedule, or maybe it’s because the food is out of this world, but one thing is for sure: husband and wife owners Nick and Birdie have built a cult following for their take on the classic American burger at their Great Barrington highway haven.

The building has seen many tenants over the years, but when Nick and Birdie moved in they brought a bold new take on slash food that reflects their culinary skills and creativity. To Birdie, it’s a way to channel her creative side while Nick is planning to introduce elements of a cuisine to the menu.

They say that they are able to be flexible and try out new projects because of their supportive customer base, incredible staff, and the nature of the fast-paced operation. They also cite elements of the business that could cut a bit more work: The Bistro Box falls somewhere between fast food and casual dining, meaning they don’t have to bother with dishwashing, but the to-go containers really pile up in the garbage. Each year they take steps towards making their business more environmentally friendly. This year, they’re searching for compostable goods that will help them cut down on waste while honoring their culinary creations. For example, Birdie prefers to have their fresh-squeezed lemonade in a clear cup, so when they find the best compostable option, they will start with small revolutionary changes like paper straws.

They’re faced with other hard decisions as business owners and are still learning how to operate on an appropriate scale that allows them to be creative with their dishes, meet customer demand, and get a good night’s sleep. “Everything falls on your shoulders, but you don’t have to answer to anyone: you get to be creative and you get to call the shots,” Birdie says. For the decision to accept BerkShares at the Bistro Box—Birdie says it’s been a great addition to their business and their “nothing to lose.”

more stories like this one at www.berkshires.org
Karns was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up in northern Virginia, Missouri, and Florida. He has a bachelor’s degree in American Government from the University of Virginia and a master’s degree in Planning from the University of Tennessee. Prior to joining BRPC as executive director, he had been assistant director of planning for Henrico County (Richmond) in Virginia, chief planner for the City of Hampton, Va., and had held other planning positions in Poquoson and Yorktown, Va., and the Central Midlands Regional Planning Council in Columbia, S.C.

Karns lives in Lanesboro with his wife Donna Cesan, community development director for the town of Adams and currently serving as interim town administrator. In the following interview, Karns discusses the evolution of BRPC during his 24-year tenure, and his observations on issues and trends in Berkshire County.

**BT&C:** What do you attribute that to?

**KARNS:** I think part of that is historic. Until 2000, Berkshire County had a county government that was despised by local municipalities. That gave people a bad taste for regional collaboration. But in practice it has grown well beyond that.

Overall, there’s much more acceptance of regional collaboration and planning. People now see BRPC as an important asset and resource for the region.

**BT&C:** What are some examples?

**KARNS:** A major trend has been the sharing of resources and personnel among cities and towns. We act on their behalf by responding to the requests local governments bring to use. It never ceases to amaze me how many things pop up that we’re asked about.

**BT&C:** Our vision.

**KARNS:** I don’t see much of an appetite for that here. Control over land-use regulations is still vigorously guarded by cities and towns. Our capability for technical assistance in local planning has grown, and towns use us quite often. However, that’s still primarily a local decision-making process, and municipalities handle their own regulations.

Trying to insert regional land-use authority is a third rail. It would be an interesting countrywide discussion. I believe there was a move to do that in the 1980s, but it didn’t go anywhere.

There are a couple of regional commissions with that power in Massachusetts and in other states, but there is no mechanism for that here in Berkshire County. It would require a landmark change and state legislation.

Currently there is not anything going on to force that issue. Due to weak market conditions, we’re not seeing a whole lot of growth or pressure for large-scale development.

However, there is more dialogue and cooperation between communities now, and greater awareness of the regional nature of environmental protection and infrastructure.

For example, the five communities that are directly affected by the “rest of river” plans for cleaning up PCBs from the Housatonic have been working together closely. They collaborate on actions like responding jointly to proposals of GE and the EPA and are putting money aside to protect their common interests and shared goals. They don’t see the need to act on every thing, but if there are specific aspects they disagree on then they simply set them aside as a group. They have established a good working relationship among themselves.

Another example is the regional brownfield program. We provide resources and funding for that, and communities with brownfield sites work together on plans for clean-ups. They generally support each other’s specific local projects. Any competing interests are worked out at the table.

**BT&C:** Transportation has long been a source of controversy at times. How do you view that?

**KARNS:** Transportation used to be a more contentious issue. For many decades there has been an idea of a Berkshire County, but it never really got off the ground. There was a move to do that in the 1980s, it was the fact that after 1980, the state Department of Transportation didn’t really support it anymore. They didn’t support the subsequent ideas that surfaced, so the resources weren’t available, even as it was being debated.

In 2003, we dropped the bypass officially from our regional transportation plans.

These days, there are less funds available for large road projects like that. So the focus has been more on spot resources for smaller projects.

There is more emphasis today on improving public transportation within the county. It’s partially a workforce develop-
development initiative to make it possible for people to get there. How do we match public transportation with the location of workers and employers? It’s a multifaceted challenge that requires many pieces to come up with new solutions.

The current initiative to bring real pas-
senger rail service to Pittsfield and Adams into Berkshire County is also interesting. The level of public involvement in that is astounding. There’s been an active and visible conversation with the state, and it’s making Boston notice that we believe we need this.

**BT&C:** In your opinion, what are some of the most interesting issues that have emerged for Berkshire County in recent years?

**KARNS:** There are many, but a few stand out.

The health and decline of the depth in student enrollments has become increasingly apparent since 2010. That’s become more notable in some school districts than others, and we’ve seen an increase in school closings. The effect of that on the quality of education is a big concern.

We also must contend with the implications of a rapidly aging population in Berkshire County. People have talked about that for a while in terms of the future, but it’s only in the last few years that we have begun to deal with it. It’s no longer “the future” – it has become a reality as more of us who are of a certain age are already there.

Fortunately, we are taking steps to address that. One important step is the Age Friendly Berkshires initiative, which BRPC has been involved with. That is a wide-ranging study and action plan to identify the needs of older residents and provide solutions to make it more livable for them (January 2018 BT&C).

The Age Friendly community initiative is an international project that is sponsored by the AARP and the World Health Organization. Berkshire County is one of the first counties in the nation to achieve the designation of an Age Friendly region.

The other big issue is the increased at-
tention to the need to attract more young working-age adults to the Berkshires. All the signs of a decline in adults between age 20 and 40 were there 20 years ago, but that has also become a reality now.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence that a few communities may be making progress on that. Pittsfield had been losing people age 20 to 40 from 1970 to 2010. But the American Community Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, indicates Pittsfield gained somewhere between 300 and 700 people in that age range between 2010 and 2015. Adams and Lanesboro seem to be moving in that direction, too.

**BT&C:** What do you attribute that to?

**KARNS:** My best guess is that in Pittsfield at least two large employers – Berkshire Health Systems and General Dynamics – have been adding workers. We’ve also seen other industries in the city expand and grow.

Also, Pittsfield has been paying atten-
tion to the needs and desires of millen-
ials. Many members of that generation pre-
ferr to live in walkable communities where they don’t have to be totally dependent on cars. The city has also been making downtown a lively space with activities and services within walking distance.

Pittsfield also has a good supply of relatively affordable housing and rent-
als of all types. It may also be attracting people from other parts of the county where housing has become unaffordable.

Adams has similar elements. It has a sup-
ply of affordable housing. It’s a walkable town, and a lot has been done to make its downtown attractive. It’s also a short drive to Pittsfield for people who work there.

Lanesboro also benefits from its prox-
imity to Pittsfield, and it has a good school system and fairly reasonable housing prices.

**BT&C:** How would you compare the overall situation in Berkshire County to-
today to what it was like in 1994?

**KARNS:** I think we’re in a much bet-
ter place than we were then. Overall, we now have an interesting breadth of economic sectors, although there’s not enough depth.

On a promising note, a lot of outside money is coming in to take advantage of inexpensive property values, and making large investments that are bringing back sites like vacant mills for housing and offices.

Interesting things are happening, like a member of the rock band Wilco buying the Redwood Motel and other property nearby in North Adams and making a $13 million investment in that. How long has it been since North Adams saw private investment on that scale?

It’s great to see those things happening, and it’s doing a lot for northern county. I think we’ve increased our understanding of national socio-economic trends and issues, and how they affect the Berkshires.

That’s important because you need to un-
derstand what’s going on to start solving problems. There’s more of a can-do attitude than there used to be. For example, as I mentioned earlier, people are moving to Pittsfield in part because the city took steps over the last 20 years to make downtown livelier. That wasn’t going on before.

Broadband is another issue that illus-
trates this. Since the 1990s, the county has actively worked to increase access to broadband, despite the obstacles the state has placed in our way. We’re not yet where we should be on that, but we’ve made a lot of progress.

That also reflects the mix of opportunity and challenge we see in many issues. As even as we’re installing more broad-
band around the county, new technologies are emerging that place new demands on that. Keeping up with these changes is go-
ing to take a constant effort.

Just as we solve earlier problems, new ones will come along that will require new efforts. But that’s no reason to stop work-

ing on them. You just have to keep moving forward and doing the best you can.

**BT&C:** How do you view the commis-

sion’s choice of your successor, Thomas

Manuezko, who also has been with BRPC for many years?

**KARNS:** He’s very positive choice. Tom is extremely capable, and he has expressed his continued commitment to BRPC. He has an excellent understanding and ap-
preciation of the region and its individual communities. He has the full confidence of our staff. So it will be a smooth transition.

**BT&C:** What is your plans for your re-
tirement? Do you intend to stay in the area?

**KARNS:** I’ve lived here longer than anywhere else, and it’s become home. Eventually my wife and I plan to do some extended traveling and to spend more time at a cabin we have in Maine. However, we expect to stay anchored here as our home base.

Although I have no desire to work full
time, I may take on some short-term pro-
fessional projects if they come along.

One of my first priorities is that we’re doing some downsizing at our house. With the free time I’ll have, I plan to focus on getting that done. There are also some community activities I’ve become inter-
ested in and will have more time to get involved with on a personal basis.

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"Just as we solve earlier problems, new ones will come along that will require new efforts. But that’s no reason to stop working on them. You just have to keep moving forward and doing the best you can."
The Pittsfield Cooperative Bank opened in 1889 intent on empowering our neighbors to build a better community. Savings and investment products were designed to benefit the customers long-term and lending decisions were made with great thought by honest, local bankers.

They still are.

Today, The Co-op is staffed by forty-nine people who not only live and work in the area, they’ve dedicated most of their lives to the region. And — because of the way we conduct business — this little known bank in the heart of the Berkshires is one of the best capitalized lenders in the entire Commonwealth.

If you’re looking for a bank with integrity, character and deep local roots... we’re easy to find. We’ve been here 129 years.