

*This material is adapted from research conducted by Mt. Auburn Associates, March 2017.*

## **JOBS AND THE ECONOMY**

### **Creative economy**

Within Berkshire County, the annual festivals associated with [Tanglewood](#) and [Jacob's Pillow](#), along with [MASS MoCA](#) and [the Clark](#), collectively draw hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, while a wide range of smaller arts organizations are also active. The establishment of Berkshire Creative, with its extensive networking activity and other supports, has helped to build the region's creative economy. With the merger of Berkshire Creative into [1Berkshire](#), support for the creative economy has continued. Columbia County is part of the broader Capital Region creative economy initiative in New York. The [Upstate Alliance for the Creative Economy](#) is overseeing efforts in that region to build and support creative enterprises and creative workers. While there is no organization in Dutchess County to specifically support the creative economy, there are strong organizations such as the [Wassaic Project](#) that are playing an important role in building creative economic assets. The Wassaic Project, located in a refurbished mill and auction house, develops high-quality programs in music, art, dance, and film, and established an annual Summer Festival that attracts over 4,000 attendees. This organization, and many others that offer quality cultural programs, are a source of economic stimulus for the region. The Litchfield County towns have a strong set of arts and cultural assets, but there is no specific initiative focused on building the creative economy.

In the area of arts education, the [Berkshires Readiness Center](#) at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) coordinates the Berkshire Arts Education Network. Through this effort, there are regular convenings of arts educators from throughout Berkshire County. In addition, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded MCLA a grant to support a collective impact project, "[Leveraging Change: Improving Access to Arts Education for Rural Communities.](#)" Other than some state advocacy efforts in New York and Connecticut, there are no similar efforts to convene and support arts education in the other subregions.

Support for efforts to further build the creative economy and leverage the region's arts and cultural assets is an area that primarily depends upon philanthropic and private sector leadership, since none of the three states have funds focused on supporting these efforts. Support for the creative economy has potential to create new jobs, promote the development of new entrepreneurial activity, and enhance the level of creative talent in the region.

### **Sustainable agriculture and food production**

Throughout the BTCF region, there are strong efforts to develop innovative approaches to preserving agricultural land. In Berkshire County, much of this work has been under the auspices of [Keep Berkshires Farming](#), a three-year initiative that became part of the [Sustainable Berkshires effort under the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission](#). The effort, based on the [Glynwood Center of Cold Spring, New York, Keep Farming](#) program, involved representatives from Berkshire County communities to develop action plans for North, Central, and South Berkshire County. An outgrowth of the Sustainable Berkshires work was the creation of the [Berkshire Farmland Initiative](#), a collaboration of Berkshire Grown, the Carrot Project, and Land For Good that provides grants to farmers and landowners in Berkshire County to help defray the costs associated with land access, farm transition, and farmland protection. Other efforts include [Berkshire Grown's Farm to Table Networking](#), which brings local farmers and food buyers together to boost sales of local farm products; the [Schumacher Center for New Economics](#), which supports farmland preservation and conservation; and, at the more local level, the [Sheffield Land Trust](#), which has a focus on farmland preservation.

Both Columbia and Dutchess counties have activities within their own counties, but are also part of an extensive network of organizations in the Hudson Valley that have focused on supporting the preservation of agricultural land.

Columbia County completed a [Farmland Protection Plan in 2013](#) that identified four strategies for ensuring that farming continues to play a central role in the economy and culture. The strategies were to: 1) provide technical assistance for existing and emerging agricultural production, 2) engage in agricultural focused economic development including infrastructure support, 3) develop a farmland protection strategy and toolkit, and 4) educate and encourage youth to enter into agricultural production and educate non-farm residents on agricultural needs and practices. The plan represented a collaborative effort among many actors including the [Columbia County Agricultural and Farmland Preservation Board](#), the [Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation](#), the [Columbia County Soil and Water Conservation District](#), [Columbia Land Conservancy](#), and the [Columbia County Department of Planning](#). The plan also involved [Cornell Cooperative Extension](#) and [Farm Credit East](#). Beyond the planning, there are many initiatives in the county to protect farms and support new and young farmers in Columbia County. The [Conserve a Local Farm](#) effort of the Columbia Land Conservancy has the Farmer Landowner Match Program, and it is now working in partnership with the [Dutchess County Land Conservancy](#) to help match farmers with landowners throughout Dutchess County.

Dutchess County has also had a long and very strong commitment to supporting its local farmers and to ensuring that land remains in agricultural uses. The current [county executive](#) has made this work a priority and has recently hired an agricultural navigator to help farmers in the county understand what resources are available and how to access them. Reflecting the county's commitment to agriculture, the [Dutchess County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board](#), in coordination with the county's Department of Planning and Development, updated the community [Agricultural and Farmland Projection Plan](#). The Dutchess Land Conservancy is also very active in developing innovative approaches, such as pre-emptive purchase rights, to supporting agricultural resources in the county.

Columbia and Dutchess counties also benefit from resources and initiatives that cover the larger Hudson River Valley. One of the most significant regional resources is [Scenic Hudson](#), which since the 1990s has been protecting and restoring the Hudson River and its landscape through farmland protection and park creation. Scenic Hudson reports to have "created or enhanced more than 65 parks, preserves, and historic sites and conserved more than 38,000 acres of land." There are also a number of regional efforts focused on supporting new farmers and linking buyers and sellers of agricultural land. These include the [Hudson Valley Farmlink Network](#); the [Hudson Valley Farm Hub](#), an initiative of the Local Economies Project; and the [Hudson Valley Farm Affordability Program](#), an effort of Equity Trust.

While there is not as robust a set of regional organizations focused on farmland protection in the BTCF communities in Litchfield County, there are many town land trusts and some regional land trusts that play a role in conservation. Unlike in other parts of the region, local players do not play a lead role; rather, they will bring in statewide resources for lands that have been identified.

In addition to efforts to preserve farmland, the region is rich with organizations focused on building the larger food ecosystem and promoting new economic opportunities in the region related to food. The newest organization involved in promoting food-related enterprises in Berkshire County is [Berkshire Agriculture Ventures](#), which provides both technical assistance as well as capital for viable ventures in the food system. The Greater Berkshire Agriculture Fund, an affiliate of [the Carrot Project](#), partners with farmers, lenders, investors, donors, and farm service providers to create loan programs connected to technical assistance and strengthen the sector's knowledge base. [Berkshire Farm &](#)

[Table](#) is a nonprofit organization created to position the region as a culinary destination for visitors looking for a great food experience.

In Columbia County, [Hawthorne Valley Association](#) is a key stakeholder involved in promoting the further development of economic activities related to food in the community. Dutchess County has been very supportive of agritourism. [Glynwood](#) has a number of efforts to promote regional food including the Cider Project; Cider Week; the New York Cider Association; and Kitchen Cultivars, a collaboration between local chefs and farmers to utilize regional product seeds. The organization also holds workshops in value-added food production and operates a Farm & Food Business Accelerator Initiative and an Incubator Without Walls. [Hudson Valley Bounty](#) promotes networking between local agricultural producers and culinary businesses. It is also establishing the LTL Local Distribution Hub network that will serve farmers, processors, and aggregators.

In Connecticut, the Northwest Hills Council of Governments is in the process of creating the [Northwest Connecticut Food Hub](#) after a feasibility study determined sufficient supply and demand in the area. The purpose of the food hub is to manage the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of food produced regionally in order to meet the demand for healthy local food while also creating a system that is economically sustainable for the farmers, distributors, and retailers. The proposed location for the food hub at this point in time is Torrington, Connecticut. It will serve the areas in the surrounding 50-mile-radius, which includes many towns in the BTCF region.

In the Litchfield area, the state of Connecticut plays a strong role. The state has a number of [programs to support farmland preservation](#) and will take the lead on local farm preservation deals. In addition, [Connecticut Farm Land Trust](#) is a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the state's endangered agricultural land; [Connecticut Farmlink](#) seeks to match buyers and sellers of farmland; the [University of Connecticut Extension](#) is a resource for food producers and stakeholders; and [the Working Lands Alliance](#) convenes many of the state's key individuals and organizations that focus on agricultural and conservation issues.

Financing for food-related ventures is available through some state- and county-level loan funds. For example, the [Columbia Economic Development Corporation](#) has a \$1.2 million micro loan fund for Columbia and Greene counties. Other sources of financial resources include [Dirt Capital Partners](#), the [1772 Foundation](#), and the [American Farmland Trust](#).

## **Tourism**

There are organizations and initiatives dedicated to developing and marketing tourism in all four counties, focused on nature-based tourism as well as heritage and cultural tourism.

In the Berkshire region, [1Berkshire](#) leads the work as a result of the merger of Berkshire Creative, the Berkshire Visitors Bureau, and the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce. In Columbia County, the [Columbia Economic Development Corporation](#) and [Columbia County Tourism](#) collaborate on promoting tourism in that region. Since 1984, [Dutchess Tourism, Inc.](#), based in Poughkeepsie, has been conducting tourism promotion and marketing for Dutchess County. The Northwest Hills Council of Governments oversees the [DiscoverNWCT.com](#) website promoting the eight towns in Northwest Connecticut. Additionally, the [Western CT Convention & Visitors Bureau](#) conducted tourism promotion that included the BTCF towns in Litchfield County through June 2016 when funding was cut. However, in January 2017, a bill was introduced to reinstate funding for the Bureau.

Because tourism is such a central industry for the region, there is support among local government and business as well as state-level support for investments that will further develop tourism opportunities. There is also a close connection between tourism and other issues in this region that

have their own independent momentum, namely conservation of natural areas and farmland and the creative economy.

Tourism is critical in each of the subregions, and there are efforts to support innovative cultural tourism, agro-tourism, and eco-tourism assets throughout the region. There have not been previous efforts to develop an overarching regional approach to tourism, in part because the subregions perceive that the tourism markets they serve are distinct.

## DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION

### Changing face of communities

In terms of the demographic challenges, in Berkshires County there is a clear focus on the issue of addressing population decline and attracting and retaining talent in the region. [The Berkshire Initiative for Growth \(BIG\)](#), an initiative of 1Berkshire, has convened stakeholders in the region to design and implement strategies to attract more young adults and families to the region. 1Berkshire also supports the [Young Professionals](#) association, which seeks to connect professionals under the age of 40 in the community. It is also working to encourage internships among employers, with the hopes of retaining more talent in the region. There are also Young Professionals Associations in [Northwest Connecticut](#), in the [Hudson Valley](#), and in [Columbia County](#). None of these efforts cross boundaries, and this is one area where scale may be important. In other words, looking at the full assets across the broader regions could make a more compelling story.

In terms of addressing inequities and the immigrant population, [the Working Cities Challenge](#) initiative in Pittsfield is seeking to go beyond providing services to building social capital and developing a more inclusive community. Pittsfield was among only five Massachusetts cities that the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston selected to be a Working Cities Challenge Round 2 implementation grant recipient. The group spearheading this work has a focus on aligning the community with the [Bridges Out of Poverty framework](#), a program that emphasizes breaking down barriers for the underprivileged, building a sustainable, collaborative community network, and reducing poverty through programs that support self-sufficiency. Part of the goal of this multi-stakeholder systems change initiative is to ensure that the city is an equal opportunity community by changing the perspectives and behaviors of organizations and businesses to foster a “culture of inclusion.”

The extensive work of human service agencies and community-based groups throughout the region also focuses on building an inclusive community. Throughout the Berkshire Taconic region, there are active efforts by locally well-respected organizations related to immigrant support and racial-ethnic inclusion, such as the [Berkshire Immigrant Center](#) and [Multicultural BRIDGE](#) in Berkshire County and [Grace Episcopal Church’s Latino Outreach Program](#) in Dutchess County. However, there is no significant initiative that is seeking to serve the needs of the entire region’s immigrant and low-income populations, and there are gaps in service organizations that provide support to the immigrant populations in both Columbia and Litchfield counties. It may be useful to identify both barriers and opportunities and new innovative approaches that could provide some scale to the many disparate efforts.

## YOUTH AND THE FUTURE WORKFORCE

### Education

Berkshire County has an extremely active group of well-coordinated organizations working on education issues from the pre-K through the postsecondary level. Collaborative activities include the

[Berkshire Compact for Education](#), which is working on a wide range of strategies related to student success, access to postsecondary education, and STEM education. Other efforts include [Berkshire United Way's Pittsfield Promise](#), which is focused on having at least 90 percent of third graders reading at grade level by 2020; the [Birth through Grade 3 Alignment Collaborative](#) run by Child Care of the Berkshires, Inc. in the Northern Berkshire region, which promotes learning in children, birth to grade three, through high-quality educational settings and instruction; and the [Berkshire County Education Task Force](#), which is working diligently to develop and recommend solutions to address declining enrollments, financial burdens, and limited diversity in many local school districts.

In contrast, education improvement efforts in Columbia and Dutchess counties and in Litchfield County appear to be on a smaller scale. The [Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress](#) has the Center for New Models in Education. The U.S. Department of Education awarded Hudson a planning grant for a [Promise Neighborhood](#) that focused on student success. Unfortunately, the city found out in December 2016 that it did not receive a Phase Two implementation grant to continue its work. Nonetheless, throughout the region, there are innovative efforts going on at the district level.

Funders, including BTCF, have focused some attention in this area, particularly around the issue of early childhood education. [BTCF's Early Childhood Development](#) initiative helps ensure that children (birth to age five) in two funded programs in the BTCF region are prepared to learn when they enter kindergarten. A new early literacy initiative, funded by BTCF donors, is also underway in Columbia County. Beyond BTCF's support for this topic, Berkshire United Way has made early childhood education and positive youth development two of its three priority areas. It is supporting regional initiatives such as the [Early Childhood Impact Council](#), and it also has its own staff working on making systemic changes related to policies, programs, and practices that shape early childhood education. In the area of youth development, its focus has been on reducing teen pregnancy and substance abuse. [Columbia County is part of the Child Care Council](#), which completed a needs assessment related to childcare availability and cost in 2014, though there do not seem to be any major efforts to address the challenges.

### **Workforce development**

Key players in the workforce development system are the Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). Though part of the federal workforce system, each state has some ability to determine the geographic scope and activities of its WIBs. WIBs develop local workforce plans, conduct workforce research, convene local workforce development stakeholders, lead efforts to engage with employers, conduct oversight of local youth workforce activities, designate one-stop career centers, and lead efforts to develop and implement career pathways. The WIBs in the region cover geographies that reach beyond the boundaries of the BTCF region. In Connecticut, the [Northwest Regional WIB](#) covers 41 municipalities; in the Berkshires, the [Berkshire County Regional Employment Board](#) covers Berkshire County; Columbia County is part of the [Columbia-Greene Workforce Development Board](#); and the [Dutchess County WIB](#) covers cities and towns in Dutchess County. Each subregion also has distinct one-stop centers that offer services to the unemployed. Focus groups and interviews revealed mixed views of the effectiveness of the WIBs and one-stops in the region.

Beyond the WIBs and one-stops, the major players in workforce development are educational institutions, particularly the community colleges and the vocational schools. [Berkshire Community College](#) plays a particularly strong role in providing postsecondary credentials and degrees and [Columbia-Greene Community College](#) is also a major institution in the region. The vocational high schools in the region, such as the [Charles H. McCann Technical School](#) in Berkshire County and [Tech Valley High School](#) that serves Columbia County, are also critical players in providing workforce-related skills for non-college bound youth. New York State runs vocational programming and adult learning through its [Boards of Cooperative Educational Services](#) (BOCES), which serves hundreds of high

school students and adults in the BTCF region. The Connecticut BTCF towns do not have a full vocational-technical program.

The focus groups at Columbia-Greene and Berkshire community colleges revealed that the community colleges serve an extremely diverse population, including many adult learners. These students face significant challenges in completing school due to issues related to work schedules, transportation access, and lack of college-readiness.

The economic development players in Columbia County and Berkshire County also recognize the critical importance of workforce development. The [Columbia Economic Development Corporation's 2016 Strategic Plan](#) identifies addressing the region's workforce skill needs as one of its four key pillars. In Berkshire County, [1Berkshires'](#) Berkshire Initiative for Growth includes an effort to educate employers about changing expectations of a millennial workforce and provides training sessions on best practices for recruiting and retaining employees. Also in Berkshire County, the [Regional Employment Board](#) has led two sector workforce initiatives, one related to health care and one related to advanced manufacturing.

### **Substance abuse**

All four BTCF counties have active local task forces focused on addressing substance abuse, particularly opioid abuse. The major players leading this work in each county include [Berkshire Public Health Alliance's Berkshire Opioid Prevention Collaborative](#), Columbia County Department of Health's [Columbia-Greene Controlled Substance Awareness Task Force](#), the Dutchess County Department of Behavioral and Community Health's [Dutchess County Substance Abuse Prevention Initiative](#), and the [McCall Center for Behavioral Health's Litchfield County Opiate Task Force](#). There are multiple substance abuse treatment providers serving each county, though available information about their capacities is limited. Additionally, the [Foundation for Community Health](#) (FCH) is taking a leadership role on this topic and has convened stakeholders in a medical education event focused on the opioid overdose epidemic. Together, FCH and the Berkshire Taconic Northwest Corner Fund are supporting the [Northwest Corner Prevention Coalition](#), a collaborative approach to addressing substance use among youth.

Substance abuse and opioid abuse are issues that have very strong momentum currently in the region. All three states in the region have recently passed legislation to address the issue. All of the local task forces have secured participation from a wide range of community partners and funding to support their efforts. The task forces have been quite productive in establishing goals and implementing a range of activities.

Though there is significant activity taking place, the issue is still pervasive throughout the region. Cross-county and regional collaboration and convening meetings to promote best practices and learning could be helpful to bring best practices to scale, support the replication of effective models, and develop more efficient service delivery and prevention approaches.

## **DEEPENING INEQUALITY**

### **Affordable housing**

There are a number of affordable housing efforts taking place throughout the region, many of which individual towns or small developers drive, but some of which have convened stakeholders to assess the state of housing in the region and build support related to affordable housing specifically. For instance, in an effort to create [the Sustainable Berkshires Plan](#), the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission sponsored both roundtable discussions and an affordable housing summit to convene

partners to gather input, review regional data, and make decisions about implications for Berkshire County's long-range plan. [HousingUs](#), an initiative of BTCF, has also played a convening and support role on efforts to promote broad-based affordable housing options throughout the Berkshire Taconic region. The HousingUs collaborative has made efforts to broaden public awareness of the need for affordable housing, to facilitate community support, and to provide technical support for local towns related to affordable housing efforts. In addition, Northwest Hills Council of Governments provides staff support to the [Northwestern Connecticut Regional Housing Council](#), which includes representatives from each member town.

Beyond building support related to affordable housing, having development and community financing capacity is also important. Currently, the region is home to a number of small-scale but active community development corporations (CDCs), or nonprofit affordable housing developers, as well as public housing authorities. In Dutchess County, [Hudson River Housing](#) is an active CDC, but there is little affordable housing production outside of Poughkeepsie. [Habitat for Humanity](#) affiliates have also contributed to small-scale affordable housing development throughout the region. While overall there are actors working on this issue, there does not seem to be significant capacity or understanding of the community development finance system in the region.

There have also been a number of efforts by towns to create affordable housing trusts. For example, in Litchfield County, both [Salisbury](#) and [Sharon](#) have taken steps to generate affordable housing locally through planning or the establishment of trusts. And, in Berkshire County, [Lenox](#), [Williamstown](#), and [Great Barrington](#) have created affordable housing trusts.

Homelessness is another issue that has generated some focused activity in the region. Both [Columbia](#) and [Dutchess](#) counties have completed plans to end homelessness, which have identified the scope of the problem as well as some potential solutions. In Connecticut, the [Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation](#) also completed a plan to end homelessness. Coalitions like the [Columbia Greene Housing Coalition](#) are working collaboratively to address homelessness. The issue of homelessness is one that might have potential for more regional leadership throughout the BTCF region.

### **Access to fresh and healthy food**

There are a number of efforts aimed at convening stakeholders in the Berkshire Taconic region around the issue of food insecurity and healthy food. Between 2006 and 2010, the northern Berkshire region participated in a four-year program, [Target: Hunger](#). The initiative led to some programs such as the double value program for SNAP benefits at the North Adams Farmers Market, the creation of school gardens, and the Hoosac Harvest community advocacy organization. More recently, in 2016, the region hosted a number of forums on the subject. On January 19, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts hosted the first meeting of the [Task Force to End Hunger](#). In April 2016, [Berkshire Food Project](#) held a meeting during the [Northern Berkshire Community Coalition's](#) monthly forum focused on the issue of food insecurity. And, following this meeting in April, Bard College hosted the [2016 ThinkFOOD conference](#) that convened experts to provide examples of the "foodways" in Berkshire County. Finally, in October 2016, the Task Force to End Hunger held another convening in Pittsfield to address the root causes of hunger.

In terms of implementation of programs and initiatives, in Berkshire County key stakeholders include the [Food Bank of Western Massachusetts](#); the [Berkshire Food Project](#), created by Williams College students in 1987; [Berkshire Grown: Share the Bounty](#); [Hoosac Harvest](#); and [the Nutrition Center](#), an educational and resource center focused on food access. Recently, [Berkshire Interfaith Organizing](#) has made food insecurity one of its major issues. Over the past year, it was able to successfully bring the community together to address transportation access issues related to the closing of the Price

Shopper supermarket in a low-income neighborhood in North Adams. Others, like the [Berkshire Coop Market](#), are working to address food insecurity by funding a program at the Great Barrington Farmer's market that doubles the value of SNAP dollars, making food much more affordable to those using SNAP benefits.

In the New York counties of the Berkshire Taconic region, there is a significant focus on access to fresh and healthy food. In Columbia County, there is a targeted initiative, [the BTCF Fresh and Healthy Food for All](#) effort, a five-year project that was funded by two anonymous donors and designed to transform the food system over time for the benefit of all residents, especially low-income families and seniors. The [Fresh and Healthy Food for All in Columbia County study](#), completed in October 2015, kick started this effort. The level of local activity in Dutchess County to take on food access issues in a strategic way is more limited. The North East Community Center does focus on food insecurity and established the [Millerton Farmers Market](#), which accepts food stamps, WIC checks, and Farmers Market Nutrition Program checks. However, there are broader efforts in the Hudson River Valley, including the [FarmOn! Foundation](#), which connects schools in the Hudson Valley with local food; [Hudson Valley Harvest](#), which aggregates and distributes local produce to restaurants, grocers, and institutions; and the [Hudson Valley Farm Fresh Food Initiative](#), a project of the Community Foundations of the Hudson Valley.

In Litchfield County, [Partners for Sustainable Healthy Communities](#) promotes sustainable agriculture and local food in Northwest Connecticut and is championing the development of a food hub in the region. In addition, the [Green Pastures Fund](#), created by an anonymous BTCF donor in 1999, seeks to preserve and encourage small, community-based agricultural ventures. The Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation has also become involved in food-related issues in the area and conducted a [study in 2015 on food insecurity](#) in Northwest Connecticut. Unfortunately, the results showed a high rate of food insecurity among children and a need for approximately \$10 million to fund unmet food needs. Though several efforts are underway to combat this severe need, there are clear gaps of food access in the area. For example, while the [Connecticut Food Bank Mobile Pantry](#) program distributes fresh food to many individuals facing transportation barriers, only three Northwest Connecticut towns are being served, and only one town, Canaan, in the BTCF region. There are also relatively few area food banks. [FISH/Friends in Service](#) to Humanity of Northwestern Connecticut, serves most of the towns in the BTCF region. Beyond that, there are some soup kitchens run by churches and some small food banks run by some of the towns.

There is also significant activity in the area of food security at the state level. All three states served by BTCF have active [Food Policy Councils](#). New York State and Massachusetts both have a fair amount of statewide activity focused on food access, while Connecticut has somewhat less activity. For example, the [New York Healthy Food & Healthy Communities Fund](#) offers an innovative financing program to catalyze development of healthy food markets in underserved communities.

## **ASSETS AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

### **Land use and conservation**

Organizations working on land conservation are spread out geographically throughout the region, with concentrations around the Hudson River Valley/Watershed, the Housatonic River, and Berkshire County.

The [Berkshire Regional Planning Commission](#) is a leader in the region on this issue as it has made both land use and conservation key elements of its Sustainable Berkshire Regional Plan and operates both [the Berkshire Brownfields Program](#) and the [Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Project](#). Other

important organizations include the [Housatonic Valley Association](#), which runs the [Housatonic RiverBelt Greenway program](#); [River Smart CT](#), the Connecticut coalition to protect watersheds; and the [Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative](#), which convenes nearly two dozen area land trusts and related groups to focus on land protection. [Scenic Hudson](#) also runs multiple initiatives focused on farmland preservation and water quality improvements, and the [Open Space Institute](#) has been very successful in protecting tens of thousands of acres of land in the region.

There are dozens of other players in the region, including local land trusts and land conservancies, land use conservation councils and commissions, watershed coalitions, and other advocacy groups focused on protecting natural resources. The [Columbia Land Conservancy \(CLC\)](#), the [Dutchess Land Conservancy \(DLC\)](#), and the [Berkshire Natural Resource Council \(BNRC\)](#) are all longstanding organizations leading significant land conservation efforts for the public good. CLC has developed master plans for its conservation areas and combines public and private land protection strategies to ensure the preservation of the county's farmland, forests, and wildlife habitats for the next generation. DLC runs land conservation programs and works to protect farmland, and also offers expert assistance to municipalities looking to acquire land for passive, public recreation. DLC engages deeply with municipalities through its [Town Hall Partnership Program](#), participating in board and committee meetings and reviewing comprehensive plans and zoning regulations related to conservation and land use planning. BNRC has been operating for 50 years to preserve land for the general public and owns over 10,000 acres of land available for public use. BNRC is currently working to create a system of trails that connects all the Berkshires as part of an effort called [The High Road](#).

To date, there has been significant collaboration across entities working on these issues. Agencies working on watersheds are particularly collaborative, as watersheds cross jurisdictional boundaries. Land trusts are also collaborating deeply to address open space and agricultural land conservation issues.

### **Town center and downtown development**

Many towns have developed comprehensive master plans, long-term visions, or community economic development strategies that include efforts to support town center or downtown revitalization. Some of the cities and towns in the region, such as Pittsfield, North Adams, and Hudson, have local economic development entities that have developed downtown plans (i.e., [Downtown Pittsfield, Inc.](#) and the [North Adams Partnership](#)) and have supported attracting and retaining small businesses (i.e., [Hudson Development Corporation](#)). In addition, some of the local chambers of commerce are also active in efforts to market and support the small retail businesses in their communities. Support for the implementation of plans that some communities have already developed could help move these projects forward.

A number of towns throughout the region have established dedicated historic districts in their town centers. For instance, Salisbury, Connecticut, with most of its buildings constructed in the 19th century, has established its town center as a historic district. [The Salisbury Historic District Commission](#) works to preserve the character of the village center as it continues to operate as the institutional and commercial center of the town. Sharon, Connecticut, is another BTCF town with a [dedicated historic district](#) and commission serving to maintain the historical and architectural integrity of the town. The establishment of a historic district (often in the town center) is somewhat common throughout the region. Other examples include the [Lenox Historic District](#), the [Great Barrington Downtown Historic District](#), the [Ashley Falls Historic District](#) in Sheffield, the Main Street Historic District in [Millerton](#), and [the Hudson Historic District](#). In many instances, these districts have associated historic commissions as well. These commissions play a role in development in these town centers.

There are organizations and programs connected to the region that support main street development. The [Connecticut Main Street Center](#) is one such entity focused on helping member organizations analyze core issues and set objectives to create vibrant downtowns that include a mix of housing, retail, social and business opportunities, and transportation for all. [Northwest Hills Council of Governments](#) is a regional member of the Connecticut Main Street Center. In New York, the [New York Main Street Program](#), administered by the [New York State Office of Community Renewal](#), offers various grants focused on revitalizing the state's downtowns through building renovations and technical assistance.

## **Transportation**

Within the BTCF region, the regional metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are responsible for transportation planning. While the majority of planning takes place locally, funding and legislation occur at federal and state levels.

Major actors involved in transportation in the region include the [Berkshire MPO](#), responsible for the county's federally mandated transportation planning processes, and the [Berkshire Regional Planning Commission](#), which carries out all planning-related efforts for the county. The [Berkshire Regional Transit Authority](#) also was a key stakeholder in the Regional Coordinated Public Transit - Human Services planning process. In Dutchess County, the [Poughkeepsie-Dutchess Transportation Council](#) operates as the county's MPO and was responsible for multiple plans including Dutchess County's long-range transportation plan, the Dutchess County Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan, and a Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. In [Columbia County](#), the county has played a major role in transportation planning, conducting a needs assessment and planning process to understand the viability of creating a coordinated countywide transportation system. In Connecticut, the [Northwest Hills Council of Governments](#) is the major player, currently in the process of facilitating the creation of a regional transportation plan that will culminate in a list of recommended projects for the region.

Beyond planning groups, other funders and nonprofits are addressing transportation-related challenges.

The [Foundation for Community Health](#), a major philanthropic funder in the region, conducted the [Northeast Dutchess County Transit Feasibility Study](#) and has made transportation grants regularly over the last several years related to non-emergency medical transportation, shopping and social transportation, and transit for seniors and disabled individuals. There are a number of nonprofits with initiatives focused on offering non-emergency medical transportation, transit for senior citizens, rideshares, and bike path development.

In terms of transportation, the region operates as most rural communities do, with a high reliance on cars and roadway transportation and limited bus options. Within the region, the [Berkshire Regional Transit Authority](#) (BRTA) provides service spanning the largest geography and including the most number of options for riders. The BRTA offers a fixed-route service with 14 bus routes in 12 communities between Williamstown and Great Barrington, six days a week. It also offers paratransit services to those who are eligible. Private transportation companies including Greyhound, Peter Pan, and Bonanza bus lines, offer intercity bus service to those in the region who can access their drop-off and pickup locations in Great Barrington, Lee, Lenox, North Adams, Pittsfield, Sheffield, Stockbridge, and Williamstown. Amtrak also provides intercity train service to those in the county with a stop in Pittsfield.

[Columbia County Public Transit](#) offers far more limited service to those in Columbia County, providing residents with shuttle service options for specific shopping locations in Hudson, three bus routes in

the southern portion of the county, and a “commuter” bus service from Hudson to Albany. Amtrak also serves Columbia County with a train stop in Hudson. The [Dutchess County Division of Public Transit](#) offers a fixed route bus service as well as demand response Dial-A-Ride and Flex services and ADA Paratransit service; however, almost all fixed-route bus stops are outside of the BTCF region and, therefore, those Dutchess County residents within the BTCF region must rely on the Flex service. Litchfield County is also served by disparate transit services. The [Northwestern Connecticut Transit District](#) (NWCTD) offers a bus service called CandyStriper, which serves northwestern Connecticut towns outside of the BTCF region. The NWCTD also offers a dial-a-ride service by appointment, which serves towns within the BTCF region during specific timeframes. Overall, public transit service options in the Connecticut towns within the BTCF region are very limited. Private intercity bus service via Peter Pan and Greyhound are available to those in the region who can access the drop-off and pickup location in Canaan.

Other nonprofits throughout the BTCF region offer services that address transit gaps and needs of specific populations such as seniors, veterans, or disabled individuals. Some of those agencies include the [Berkshire Community Action Council's BerkshireRides](#), towns' councils on aging, [Elder Services of Berkshire County, Inc.](#), the [Healthcare Consortium Children and Adults Rural Transportation Service](#) (CARTS), and the [North East Community Center](#), among others. As the population in the region continues to age, there is bound to be increased demand for senior transit services for medical appointments, shopping, and socialization purposes.

While significant momentum exists around efforts that nonprofits can push forward independently (e.g., rail trails and bike access, paratransit service, transport for the elderly and those who do not own cars), efforts to expand public transit services appear to have stalled within each state. Federal efforts to motivate coordinated transportation planning may present an opportunity to improve cross-regional coordination.

## **Broadband**

The development of the infrastructure needed to improve access to broadband is highly jurisdictional and dependent, to a large extent, on state policies and regulations as well as the number and type of providers serving the communities. Local and regional advocacy efforts are essential to promoting increased access in rural communities and there are very active and promising efforts throughout the region.

In Berkshire County, telecommunications infrastructure was a focus of the [Sustainable Communities Initiative](#), which laid out a set of strategies aimed at improving access. Through a collaboration of several local efforts, an entity called [WesternMA Connect, Inc.](#), organized in 2009, was successful in getting a large state capital commitment toward a regional broadband network. As a result, the [Massachusetts Broadband Institute](#) brought 1,200 miles of fiber optic network to Western and North Central Massachusetts through its [MassBroadband 123](#) initiative. However, this did not achieve full connectivity for Massachusetts and other efforts are still underway to connect even more residents. [WiredWest](#), a cooperative of delegates from member towns, has been working to bring a fiber-to-the-home network to 44 participating Western Massachusetts towns and has recently gained momentum after a period where the project had stalled.

In New York, Columbia County has secured \$2.5 million through the [New NY Broadband Grant Program](#) and is one of the first of six targeted counties to receive new connections by 2017 as a result of the Time Warner-Charter's merger. [Connect Columbia](#), a community action network made up of a group of residents and elected officials who came together to form a community broadband task force, is focused on expanding broadband access throughout the county.

Connecticut, which established a [State Broadband Office](#) in 2015, released a report documenting structural barriers to access in 2016. An attachment to the report provided recommendations to improve access. Additionally, in June 2016, the state awarded the [Northwest Hills Council of Governments](#), on behalf of NWCONNECT (an active telecommunications infrastructure citizen advocacy group), a \$200,000 grant to conduct a study outlining a business model to provide coverage.

### **Innovation and entrepreneurship**

Efforts to support innovation and entrepreneurial development include strategies that seek to support new business start-ups through technical assistance and financing; efforts to support the growth of small, innovative companies; and strategies that focus on the workforce pipeline, most notably through the support of STEM in education.

The major economic development players in the region have made this a priority. Entrepreneurship and innovation was the first “pillar” in [Columbia Economic Development Corporation’s \(CEDC\) 2016 Strategic Plan](#). This plan called on CEDC to “create and foster an entrepreneurial ecosystem that promotes establishment, growth and long-term success of small business.” “Innovate” is also one of the core strategies of 1 Berkshires’ focus on building resources that foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business expansion in these economic sectors. [The Th!nk Dutchess Alliance](#) for business is also emphasizing small business development as part of its countywide economic development strategy. In Northwest Connecticut, a focus of the efforts in the area of innovation and entrepreneurship involves creating a food hub.

Beyond strategy, there are a number of specific programs such as entrepreneurial training programs, pitch competitions, networking events, and financing efforts, including microbusiness lending, angel investing, and startup funding, particularly in Berkshire and Columbia counties. While many of the efforts broadly promote innovation- and technology-related startups, there are also a number of efforts in the region seeking to support entrepreneurial activity in the creative industries and food-related industries (as previously described). In the area of STEM education, [the Berkshires STEM Pipeline Network](#) is a collaborative developed to promote and continue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education.

The proposed [Berkshire Innovation Center \(BIC\)](#) is another effort that is seeking to support new innovative activity in the region. This proposed new facility will provide specialized space and equipment for companies in manufacturing and in the biotech sector. The plan also includes space for an accelerator and business incubator along with conference and training facilities. The [Massachusetts Life Sciences Center](#) awarded the city of Pittsfield a \$9.7 million grant to build the facility at the [William Stanley Business Park](#). BIC’s board is working with the state to bridge the funding gap that is delaying construction.

There are components of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship for which there is very limited regional leadership. Most notably, the issue of impact investing requires a level of scale where a geographic approach, beyond just one county, may be the best approach. Networking and convening entrepreneurs and social innovators is another area where there is potential for enhanced cross-border efforts.