

LOCAL NEWS

UPDATES AT [FACEBOOK.COM / SENTINELANDENTERPRISE](https://www.facebook.com/sentinelandenterprise) AND [TWITTER.COM / SENTANDENT](https://twitter.com/sentandent)

[sentinelandenterprise.com](https://www.sentinelandenterprise.com)

HIGHER EDUCATION

Fitchburg State ranked for social mobility

Submitted Article

FITCHBURG » For the second consecu-

tive year, Fitchburg State University has been recognized for upward social mobility in U.S. News & World Report's annual ranking of colleges and universities.

The ranking among regional universities reflects Fitchburg State's success in enrolling and graduating large numbers
FSU » 6A

FSU

FROM PAGE 3A

of economically disadvantaged students.

"Access and affordability are at the very foundation of our mission," Fitchburg State President Richard S. Lapidus said in statement.

"We are proud of our track record of creating opportunities for all students, and for helping them complete their studies and move forward with their lives and careers," he said.

The methodology looked at students who qualified for Pell Grants, who typically come from households whose family incomes are less than \$50,000 annually, though most Pell Grant money goes to students with a total family income below \$20,000.

Lapidus said the university's success in creating upward social mobility is tied to the work Fitchburg State is continuing in its newest strategic plan, whose three pillars are educational justice, being a student-ready campus, and inclusive excellence.

To learn more about the U.S. News & World Report rankings, please visit <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/regional-universities-north/social-mobility>.



SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE FILE PHOTO

Fitchburg State University President Richard Lapidus said 'Access and affordability are at the very foundation of our mission.'

LOCAL

Gerard Russell, Assistant managing editor
508-793-9245
newstips@telegram.com

COLLEGE TOWN

By **Scott O'Connell**

Worcester Telegram

USA TODAY NETWORK

Fitchburg State gets rid of application fee

Fitchburg State University has become the latest college in the region to eliminate its undergraduate application fee, a move it said is meant to help families who are struggling financially.

Students normally have to pay a \$50 fee to apply to the university. The school plans to reach out to applicants who have already paid the fee this fall to offer them reimbursement.

“The elimination of the fee removes a financial barrier to students applying to college and is part of our institutional equity initiatives,” Fitchburg State President Richard Lapidus said in a statement, adding that the move also “builds on the university’s work to increase access and improve retention.”

“By eliminating the application fee, Fitchburg State is also responding to the

From Page A3

financial impact that the COVID-19 global pandemic has had on Massachusetts residents, families, and prospective college students,” said the university’s director of admissions, Jinawa McNeil.

Earlier this fall, Worcester Polytechnic Institute announced it was getting rid of its application fee for similar reasons.

See COLLEGE, A4

HIGHER EDUCATION


JOHN LOVE / SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE

Hannah Keohan of Lunenburg, Herbert Acosta of Los Angeles and Tommy Parsons of Peabody pose ahead of Fitchburg State University's 2019 commencement.

A golden ticket

State universities offer economic opportunity

By **Barry M. Maloney**
and **James F. Birge**

Those of us from modest up-bringsings love a good “rags to riches” story.

In Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl — or “Wilie Wonka” — a working-class boy gets the golden ticket that will ultimately deliver him and his family from economic despair.

For many in Massachusetts, that golden ticket can be your local state university. We say this because of who our students are; how well the nine state universities are serving them; and where they go when they graduate.

Several well-known Massachusetts colleges do a good job advancing the prospects of non-wealthy students, notably MIT. However, it is the Massachusetts State Universities that do this for so many residents of our state's gateway cities and underserved populations. Our nine campuses, strategically located across the commonwealth, offer high-quality, affordable routes to bachelor and master's degrees with the average price of around \$11,000 per year for commuting in-state residents. We are mission driven to educate students from very diverse racial, cultural, socio-economic, and educational back-



PHOTO COURTESY UML

Sam Codyer, left, graduated from UMass Lowell on Friday, May 29 via the university's virtual commencement. Codyer is shown on commencement day with his new son and his fiancée, Amy McGrath, at home in Fitchburg.

grounds.

Worcester State University, for example, has successfully re-

cruited Worcester Public Schools students. Our percentage of students of color doubled between 2011 and 2018, and the majority

of our incoming students are their family's first generation to attend college. Many of these

Universities

FROM PAGE 8A

students face barriers to success that result in lower retention and graduation rates. These achievement gaps are well documented; at the state universities, we set out to address them.

In 2019 Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (a top 10 public liberal arts college in the country) earned the highest score in the nation from the University of Southern California Center on Race and Equity for educating black students well. It is a core belief that diversity, equity, and inclusion are the foundation to a robust liberal arts education. Every state university is committed to reflecting the state Department of Higher Education's Equity Agenda.

For many of our students, "going to college" can feel like being dropped, blindfolded, in the middle of a forest. We offer them programs, as well as faculty and staff, dedicated to their success. Even a small financial crisis can lead such students to consider withdrawing. For them, every state university has an institutional emergency fund, which collectively has helped thousands to stay in school.

All Massachusetts State Universities provide a high-quality learning experience endorsed by our graduates and valued by employers. We are recognized as offering some of the best nursing, teacher preparation, fine and performing arts, and political science pro-

grams, and liberal arts is a hallmark.

Full-time professors teach the vast majority of our classes, and large lecture halls are few and far between. Our online class sizes reflect a commitment to personalized learning. State universities reporting on graduates' outcomes say 84% to 99% of them land jobs or are in graduate school within a short period of time.

We take in a large swath of Massachusetts's high school graduates, provide a welcoming and outstanding learning environment and meet their financial and educational challenges. How do they emerge?

First: as graduates, in far higher percentages over the past five years. A bachelor's degree itself predicts a lifetime of higher earnings and that "Golden Ticket" to economic mobility. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2020) data show the median salary for bachelors-degree holders is \$64,896, while for someone with a high school education, it is \$38,792.

Second: prepared to propel their families ahead economically. As they move forward, so does our state. As lawmakers at all levels focus on social justice issues and reforms, we urge them to recognize that economic justice and economic mobility go hand in hand.

Third: as Massachusetts success stories. Our alumni can be found running cities and towns and large and small business organizations. If they leave, like Worcester State alumnus Imoi-

gele Aisiku, M.D., '92 - who served on the medical team that saved Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords' life- they often return to the Bay State, and settle here. There is also Dan Kuszpa '98, a history and communications major while at MCLA, who now works for Nanmac in Milford designing temperature sensors for the cutting-edge rockets of SpaceX.

About 11,000 degrees are earned by our graduates every year. Emerging from the COVID-19 employment downturn depends upon their tax revenue and purchasing power to fuel a recovery.

The state university golden ticket, like Charlie's, is redeemable for those who persist (and in an environment that's far more supportive than the chocolate factory's!). A four-year state university education leads to economic opportunity - not just for our graduates, but for the state as well.

Worcester State University President Barry M. Maloney is the longest serving of the nine-member Massachusetts State University Council of Presidents. His parents worked in the Springfield public schools, which he attended. President James F. Birge is in his 5th year at MCLA and is a proud graduate of Westfield State University. The other state universities are Bridgewater, Fitchburg, Framingham, Salem, the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, and MassArt.

Sentinel & Enterprise

Saturday, September 12, 2020

\$2.00

FACEBOOK.COM/SENTINELANDENTERPRISE

TWITTER.COM/SENTANDENT

sentinelandenterprise.com



COURTESY OF FSU

The 20 new police officers attend Friday's ceremony at Fitchburg State.

FSU

20 recruits complete police course

Staff Report

FITCHBURG » Twenty new police officers took the oath of honor at Fitchburg State University's third recruit officer course graduation exercises on Friday.

Fitchburg State's police program, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation, graduates officers in five years with bachelor's

and master's degrees and certification to serve as municipal police departments in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

The third ROC graduates earned their bachelor's degrees in May and this summer completed an arduous, 15-week academy including defensive tactics, firearms qualification and emergency vehicle operations. They can now be-

gin their online master's degree program.

University President Richard S. Lapidus said most of the graduates already have jobs with area police departments.

"This speaks highly of the character and the quality of the students in this program," he said. "The university is proud of this program and its graduates."

Municipal Police Training Committee Interim Executive Director Robert J. Ferullo congratulated the new officers on entering a meaningful profession, and encouraged them to be safe and to embrace the changes in their field.

"We need to protect our integrity," Ferullo said. "Don't ever tarnish the badge."



COURTESY OF FSU

Officer Grant Jensen of Fitchburg addresses his fellow graduates during their graduation ceremony.

Police

FROM PAGE 1A

Academy Director Lisa Lane saluted the graduates for their ability to thrive during unique challenges.

"The police academy is a grueling course of training which demands a full physical and mental effort by all who go through it," she said. "It is stressful, it is demanding. It is not easy under normal circumstances, and these were far from normal circumstances."

Between the COVID-19 pandemic and national tumult surrounding the police profession, Lane said, new police officers are entering the profession at a unique time.

"Always make sure that you go out there and serve with honor, integrity and pride," Lane said. "Be a force for good. Be an agent for change. Treat everyone you encounter with dignity, equity and empathy. Be honest with yourself, be self-aware, be self-reflective, and then make any changes that you need to make to be better."

Class Leader Grant Jensen addressed his classmates at the ceremony.

"Policing right now is in a state where most people are questioning us and asking why we think it's still worth being a police officer," Jensen said. "These changes to a profession that we thought we were getting into has not stopped any of us from our end goal of becoming police officers. What I've seen from the

3rd ROC is that there is a passion and drive to serve the communities we are going to, that we aren't just your normal 21- and 22-year-old new college graduates most people believe we are. Instead, we are a group of eager, passionate, and resilient men and women who want to make a difference within our communities we are going to serve. That none of us here are satisfied with being average and that we were always willing to listen and learn to fix our deficiencies.

"Don't forget how hard you've worked to get this opportunity in your life," Jensen continued. "The badge you wear is to help individuals who need you the most in their time of need. Take pride in what you do and honor in who you serve."

The members of the third recruit officer course are: Cameron Amaral of Middleboro; William Bento of Medfield; Michael Brito of Sagamore Beach; Shannon Dawson of Hudson; Joshua Folmer-LaFleur of Fitchburg; Nicholas Girard of Leominster; Grant Jensen of Fitchburg; Alysia King of Groton; Matthew Krikorian of Groton; Sean Malone of Dedham; Allison McCann of Westminster; Kelly McCusker-Brown of Watertown; Cody Normandin of Uxbridge; Keegan O'Donnell of Danvers; David Pratt of South Hadley; Abigail Robinson of Weymouth; Courtney Soares of Dartmouth; Jared Taje of East Taunton; Benjamin Torrence of Bradford; and Cody Walter of Westminster

LOCAL NEWS

UPDATES AT [FACEBOOK.COM / SENTINELANDENTERPRISE](https://www.facebook.com/sentinelandenterprise) AND [TWITTER.COM / SENTANDENT](https://twitter.com/sentandent)

[sentinelandenterprise.com](https://www.sentinelandenterprise.com)

14TH IN COUNTRY

FSU's moot court gets high marks

Submitted Article

FITCHBURG » The American Moot Court Association, whose tournament brings top students from more than 200 colleges and universities across the nation, has ranked Fitchburg State University's program 14th in the country.

Professor Paul Weizer, a member of the economics, history and political science department, founded Fitchburg State's moot court program in 2000 with four students, and the team advanced to the final round of the national competition in its

FSU » 6A

FSU

FROM PAGE 3A

first year.

"We were hooked after that," he said.

The competition pits teams of students against one another on opposing sides of a legal case, as in an appellate court proceeding. Students must argue both sides of the case in the course of the competition, making timed arguments as well as fielding questions from a panel of legal experts and submitting written briefs.

The American Moot Court Association's Top

Program Scores recognize schools based on their performance in both the AMCA National Tournament Oral Advocacy competition and the AMCA National Tournament Written Brief competition. The scores are weighted at 67% for the oral advocacy competition and 33% for the written brief competition.

Weizer estimates 200 Fitchburg State students have competed during its years in the national program. Many graduates of the program return to campus each year for the regional tournament on the Fitchburg State campus. Their ranks include police officers, lawyers and court

clerks, though Weizer said the skills developed through moot court are applicable far beyond the legal profession.

"They learn public speaking, to stand up and answer questions under duress, to think on their feet, and they develop strong writing skills," Weizer said. "The ability to speak well and write well are transferable to any career they go on to."

Weizer said he remains especially proud that Fitchburg State students have excelled in the national tournament every year against larger, more expensive institutions. The national rankings echo that point.

"I tell my students, they're competing against students who are paying 10 times as much as they are," Weizer said. "It just shows we have really good students. I can take my best students and they can compete with anybody's best, and they have, consistently. We have a lot of very talented students, and it's great we can give them the opportunity to compete on a national stage."

Fitchburg State will host the regional tournament this November, which will be conducted virtually for the first time.



Fitchburg leaders are hoping to harness arts and culture to help fuel the city's revival. (Photo by Michael Jonas)

ARTS + POLICY / ARTS AND CULTURE

Fitchburg pinning revival hopes on arts and culture

One-time mill city looks ahead in effort to rekindle its past vitality



MICHAEL JONAS

Sep 23, 2020

FITCHBURG MAYOR Stephen DiNatale's office bears all the markings of the workspace of a small-city Massachusetts leader working hard to pull up his community, a place that has struggled for years following the exodus of industries that once made mill towns like this hum with economic vigor.

There are sketches of planned development projects, a big photograph showing downtown Fitchburg back in its pre-World War II heyday, and in one corner a group of shiny ceremonial shovels standing against the wall, mementos from recent groundbreaking celebrations that DiNatale is anxious to replicate. The affable 68-year-old former state representative is laser-focused on economic development, and in a hurry for it to happen. "I'm not a patient guy," said DiNatale.

It's easy to see why. Median household income is \$55,000 in Fitchburg, \$22,000 below the statewide average. Meanwhile, the pandemic has hit the city hard, with its 15.5 percent unemployment rate in August the eighth highest in the state.



Fitchburg Mayor Stephen DiNatale (Photo by Michael Jonas)

A sketch portrait of JFK on the wall is the closest thing to art in DiNatale's fluorescent-lit workaday space, temporary quarters Fitchburg municipal government is occupying in a former GE building while its 19th century city hall undergoes a major facelift. Despite the spartan decor in an office that is much more functional than finely appointed, the arts figure prominently in the mayor's plans for adding more of those shiny shovels to his collection.

DiNatale and other Fitchburg leaders are determined to restore the city's standing as a vibrant hub of North-Central Massachusetts, and they say a focused effort on arts and culture will play an important role in that. It's a bet that lots of economically distressed communities have made, fueled by the example of cities that have looked to the "creative economy" for economic salvation.

The idea gained lots of steam following publication of city theorist Richard Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which argued that arts and other creative-economy sectors were key to urban revival in the 21st century.

Fitchburg, with its often desolate downtown streets, may not seem, at first blush, like a place where the creative-economy could find much of a foothold. But

Shovels from groundbreakings in Fitchburg Mayor Stephen DiNatale's office. (Photo by Michael Jonas)

the hilly city of 40,000, which sits along the Nashua River 30 miles north of Worcester, has some big things going for it that make the arts and culture venture more than a urban-revival pipe dream.

Fitchburg boasts a nearly 100-year-old art museum, whose collection ranges from ancient Egypt to modern Massachusetts painters. A boarded-up former middle school that sits directly across from the museum is slated to be converted, along with two other adjacent buildings, into 62 units of living and work space for artists. And Fitchburg State University, which enrolls 3,400 undergraduates and about 1,600 graduate students, recently purchased a long-shuttered vaudeville-era theater on Main Street, with plans for a multimillion-dollar renovation to make it home to regional productions.

Marc Dohan, the executive director of NewVue Communities, a nonprofit Fitchburg community development organization spearheading the artists' housing project, said DiNatale is hardly a pie in the sky dreamer and the strategy is already bearing fruit.

“He’s not just an arts and culture mayor. He’s an economic development mayor, and he sees this as a way to improve the city,” said Dohan.

ARTS AND CULTURE BOOKENDS

When Nick Capasso was being interviewed eight years ago to be the new director of the Fitchburg Art Museum, he turned the tables at one point to ask something to the eight museum trustees who were meeting with him. “My only real question was, why are you a trustee? Why are you doing this?” he said. “They went around the table and everybody answered the question individually, and not one single person said the word art. I was a little taken aback.”

What all of them said was they wanted to “to give back to the community,” said Capasso. “They all grew up in Fitchburg when it was a great place. They all watched it go down the chute.” But they saw that the city — and the museum — had something to offer, and they were committed to being part of that.

The charge from the trustees after he was hired, said Capasso: “Don’t just revitalize the museum. Figure out how the museum can help revitalize the city.”

Capasso has been busy since figuring how to do that. He said those efforts have been greatly boosted by an usually collaborative spirit among city leaders, higher education officials, private developers, and the arts community that is starting to bubble up in Fitchburg.

“I found a whole bunch of people who were willing to think creatively in new ways,” he said. Rather than lamenting the economic losses the city has sustained, he said, they seemed to understand “it’s time to apply energy towards figuring out what Fitchburg should be for the century we’re actually in.”

The museum, which was founded in 1925 using a bequest from Eleanor Norcross, the daughter of a successful Fitchburg mayor, who had herself enjoyed some success as a painter, has complemented its worldwide collection by focusing on expanding its showings of work by contemporary New England artists. That has included an effort to include work by artists from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, something the museum had not always paid much attention to, despite more than a quarter of Fitchburg residents being Hispanic.

It’s all part of a much more conscious effort to be part of the broader arts-focused community-building underway in Fitchburg.

Capasso, who talks regularly with the mayor and other city officials, university leaders, and community groups, is working not only to burnish the museum’s reputation in the art world, but to have it fully embrace its role as an important nonprofit institution in Fitchburg. Lots of museums, he said, put the artwork at the center of their work. Their view is that “art is the client,” he said. Capasso said the Fitchburg museum is committed to “using art to serve people.”

A local neighborhood association now holds its regular meetings at the museum. The museum also launched a program with the Fitchburg schools, underwriting the admission fee so that every 4th and 7th grade student in the district makes an annual trip to the museum. Capasso has also set up an area of the museum where they rotate artwork by Fitchburg school students. “Kids in our country get a lot of validation for academics and athletics. Art kids don’t get much,” he said.

“There are many spokes to the wheel of revitalization,” Capasso said of Fitchburg’s economic redevelopment efforts. “You can’t let the arts do it all by themselves. It’s not a powerful enough segment.” But it can, he said, “be part of a much larger whole.”

While the museum is the most obvious pillar of Fitchburg's arts and culture effort, Fitchburg State University serves as the other anchor of that larger whole.

The two institutions bookend the city's downtown, the museum a block off Main Street at the western end of the business district and the university perched on a hill a half mile off Main Street at the eastern end of downtown. Fitchburg State has long had somewhat of an arm's length relationship to the city. Commuter students often come and go from the campus without ever setting foot downtown, and the 1,700 undergraduates who live on campus — many of them from communities within 50 or 60 miles of Fitchburg — often stay cloistered on the campus there during the week and head home on the weekends.

In 2015, the art museum and university inked a memorandum of agreement to collaborate more closely and be part of an effort to boost the city and region. The agreement included granting university students free admission to the museum, which would also begin serving as the de facto art museum for the school, which does have a museum or gallery of its own.

Richard Lapidus, the president of Fitchburg State, said the university has for several years been exploring ideas that would “create some gravitational pull” to draw visitors to Fitchburg in the same way other universities often help make communities a regional destination for cultural events, dining, or nightlife. In 2015, a year after Lapidus's arrival, the school laid down a huge marker in that effort. It bought an entire block of buildings on Main Street, which includes several retail storefronts and is anchored by the Fitchburg Theater, a 1,700-seat theater that was a grand stage for local productions when it opened in the 1920s but has sat empty and deteriorating since it closed in the late 1980s, serving in its last incarnation as a three-screen multiplex movie theater.

The university is planning a \$35 million renovation with the goal of returning the theater to its original splendor and developing it as a regional theater draw. Lapidus said the idea is for a smaller version of the Hanover Theater, Worcester's flagship production stage.

The university moved into the Theater Block complex a large workspace for its video game design program, the only one of its kind in Massachusetts public higher education. It also opened a center dubbed the “Idea Lab,” incubator space that offers resources for university

students, faculty, and members of the broader community to work on potential business startup ideas.

It's a way to “create a different front door for ourselves” and a way to “plant a flag” downtown, said Lapidus.

A DOWNTOWN PIVOT



Fitchburg State University bought the 1920s era vaudeville theater and adjacent office space in downtown Fitchburg and is planning a \$35 million makeover. (Photo by Michael Jonas)



There's good news and bad news when it comes to economic vitality in downtown Fitchburg. The good news is that the streetscape is largely intact, with the 19th century edifices that line Main Street, including some magnificent Victorian architecture from the city's industrial heyday, looking much as they did when the city was a thriving center of paper and textile manufacturing. The bad news is that even in the pre-COVID days the sidewalks were often deserted, the bustle once created by department stores and other downtown commercial fixtures largely gone.

DiNatale, who grew up in next-door Leominster, lights up when he talks about a time when Main Street was alive with the flurry of foot traffic shown in the photograph he keeps in his office from Fitchburg in the 1930s or '40s. "This was the destination city growing up," he said of its place in the life of the North-Central Massachusetts region. "It was an event to go to Fitchburg, and downtown was the place to be."

DiNatale is enough of a realist to know the days of big department stores drawing people downtown in places like Fitchburg are over. But the forward-looking pragmatist in him says it can nonetheless be something much more alive than what's there now. "It will never return to that," he said of the image in the big black and white photo. "But we're nimble and we're going to pivot."

One literal pivot the city is embarking on, with help from a \$3 million state grant, is returning Main Street to a two-way road along with other changes to make the street more pedestrian friendly. The change in the 1960s to a one-way street, say DiNatale and city leaders, only helped to speed traffic through Fitchburg.

DiNatale said the goal is to again bring people downtown, but it won't be to shop at big stores, but instead to eat a restaurant or shop at small stores offering unique wares. The city also wants to have more people on the streets downtown by having more of them live there. In the last two years, 96 new units of housing have been built and 330 units permitted in

the downtown area. The City Council recently approved new zoning to allow an additional 1,000 units of new housing downtown. “The more housing we can provide, the commercial retail will follow,” said DiNatale.

Some of the housing that’s on tap will not only contribute to overall greater density downtown, but will be another element of the arts and culture pivot DiNatale envisions. The boarded up former B.F. Brown Junior High School, which sits right across the street from the Fitchburg Art Museum entrance, is “a billboard that says ‘blight,’” said Capasso, hardly an inviting setting for the regional museum-goers he’s trying to attract. But if things stay on track, the building will soon make a very different statement. The former school, along with an adjacent building that once served as the city stables and another that was an annex to the city high school, are being developed into 62 rental units of artists live/work space.

The project is being developed by NewVue Communities, the local nonprofit development agency, and rent for the units will be kept affordable — ranging from \$800 a month for a studio to \$1,400 or \$1,500 a month for a three-bedroom apartment. (“Artists have families, too,” said Dohan, the NewVue director, about the larger units.)

Dohan said market studies showed strong demand for artist housing in the area. While *Rise of the Creative Class* gave cities the idea that they could drive revitalization by wooing artists, Fitchburg leaders say their initiative is aimed at helping artists who already there thrive and contribute to the city’s comeback. “We don’t want to open this building with 60-something apartments and end up with artists that come here from Somerville, from Jamaica Plain and displace the local artists,” said Francisco Ramos, a community organizer at NewVue.

Three years ago, Florida published a sequel to his 2002 book titled *The New Urban Crisis*. In it, he laments the gaping inequality in New York, San Francisco, and other big winners in the urban renaissance of recent decades. “I totally and completely underestimated the power of the urban revival,” Florida said in an interview by email. But Fitchburg is a long way from seeing those kinds of downsides, and arts and culture can play a vital role in “economy building as well as placemaking” in such communities, said Florida.

As much as the museum and university serve as important anchors for Fitchburg's arts and culture initiative, the artists' housing makes an equally important statement about the effort. Using the creative economy to drive revitalization, say local leaders and national experts, is not just a matter of having an obvious draw like a regional art museum, but also depends on raising the visibility of the local arts and culture scene. That includes everything from artisans and artists selling their work to locally produced food that helps give the city a distinct identity and unique way to draw people to spend time — and money — there.

One good example of that came last year, when a neglected alleyway that connects Main Street with another main thoroughfare running parallel to it was transformed into a sidewalk gallery by installing 30 large murals of locally-produced artwork. The Activate Mill Street initiative was spearheaded by a state-sponsored program aimed at reviving designated districts in Gateway Cities. The Transformative Development Initiative, operated by the state's economic development and finance agency, MassDevelopment, contributed \$40,000 to the Mill Street effort on top of \$50,000 that was raised locally. The organizers had to winnow the field, with twice as many artists applying as they were able to select — another indication, say local leaders, of a large latent arts community in Fitchburg.

Along with the murals, there were more than two dozen events tied to the project, including a music series at a small plaza at one end of the alleyway, pop-up al fresco dining with tables set up on the plaza and meals served by a local caterer, and free yoga classes on Saturdays.

“It's symbolic, I think, of change in Fitchburg,” said Kim Jones, co-owner of Strong Style Coffee, a two-year-old cafe that looks out on the plaza where the events took place. “It showed Main Street being a place you come and enjoy and it's bright and it's colorful.”

Also very much symbolic of that change is her cafe, which increasingly serves as a civic gathering spot and important outpost of the city's nascent arts effort. “Coffee is what we do,” said Jones. “But more than that, our staff is so committed to Fitchburg and I'm so committed to Fitchburg that we really just try to put community first.”

Jones, 40, who grew up next door in Lunenburg and graduated from Fitchburg State, has turned Strong Style into a vibrant community center, hosting musical performances, poetry readings, and family-friendly events that are a draw for all ages. “This became a place where the community feels comfortable,” she said.

NewVue, the Fitchburg nonprofit that is developing the artists’ housing, has also launched a program to help local artists with everything from marketing to business plans. The organization’s “art stewards” program consists of a series of eight sessions geared toward

giving artists who often work in isolation the kind of support and camaraderie those in other sectors often enjoy.

At an August session of the program — which moved to Zoom after the onset of the pandemic — Eugene Finney, who used to work at the Fitchburg Art Museum and now helps artists get their work placed in corporate settings in the Boston area, was the guest speaker.

“Artists are very creative, but how do you complete a tax form, how do you market your work, how do you create an arts business?” said Jessie Olson, a local writer who was taking part in the art stewards program.



Mayor Stephen DiNatale wants to bring back the vitality and street life shown in a picture of downtown Fitchburg in more vibrant days. (Photo by Michael Jonas)

Dohan, the NewVue executive director, said the art steward idea, like the murals commissioned along Mill Street, is aimed at helping to build the Fitchburg arts scene from the ground up. “We have arts and culture that’s already here,” said Dohan. “So this builds on those assets rather than trying to make us into something we’re not.”

Jennifer Vey, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said the way to harness the full power of arts and culture to contribute to economic revitalization is to first pursue community-building efforts like the art steward program that supports local residents. “If you do it well for the people that live there, the tourism will come,” said Vey, director of the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking at Brookings. “Art is a way to generate civic pride and engagement, and to foster a sense of community identity. I think if you do that well, and that’s reason in and of itself to do it, you will have the added benefit of drawing others to your community, who will come to patronize your restaurants and businesses.”

While Fitchburg leaders hope to bring back the vitality that once existed downtown, they know it won’t be driven by the sorts of businesses that thrived there decades ago. “What’s more convenient than sitting at your computer and clicking on it and having a package delivered to your home?” said Dohan. “You can’t compete on convenience anymore. What you’re aiming for is to create an experience of some kind, something that’s unique and cannot be replicated. That’s what arts and culture is.”

“Back in the day, everyone bought everything on Main Street,” said Noah Koretz, director of MassDevelopment’s Transformative Development Initiative targeting Gateway Cities. “In the current online, large-scale retail world, the stuff that still manages to stay relevant and stays in business is stuff that’s small-scale and unique and experiential.”

That includes Kim Jones’s coffee shop along with the renovations to turn the Fitchburg Theater into a regional performance destination. And it includes a new business, Urban Fork, slated to open this fall on Main Street that will feature a state-of-the-art kitchen shared by local food entrepreneurs and a retail section where those products, including prepared meals, as well as other locally-sourced food products are sold.

“There’s so much you can incorporate into arts and culture,” said Matthew Fournier, a local developer who is building out the space, which his wife, Kelly Fournier, will operate. “It’s not just painting on a canvas,” said Fournier, who received a \$160,000 grant for the project from the state’s Collaborative Workspace Program.

EYEING A CULTURAL PRIZE

In 2013, Fitchburg was turned down when it applied to the Massachusetts Cultural Council to have the downtown area recognized as a distinct “cultural district,” a designation made by the state agency that communities can use to secure access to various state programs, boost tourism, and encourage private development.

“They said, you’ve got the arts and culture,” said Capasso, the museum director. “You’ve got the architecture, you’ve got the theater. What you do not have is a livable and walkable downtown with the amenities one would expect in a cultural district. There’s no place to shop or get a drink. There’s nobody on the street. When you fix that, come back,” he said. “So that’s the challenge.”

But bringing vitality back to Main Street is somewhat of a chicken-and-egg challenge. Potential businesses are looking for signs of foot traffic that tell them there would be a market to tap, but people need a reason to stroll the streets. A vibrant downtown nightlife, said Lapidus, the university president, is something “our students are screaming for.”

City government itself has tried to help goose the market by showing its own commitment to Fitchburg's revival and the idea that its downtown can again become a place to be. A \$32 million renovation to the public library is part of that effort. But the showpiece is the \$23.5 million renovation of Fitchburg City Hall that is now nearing completion. Nothing symbolized the retreat from Main Street more than the shuttering of the city's own municipal headquarters eight years ago when most city offices, including the mayor's, were exiled to temporary space in a former industrial building off Main Street. The ornate Greek Revival city hall, which dates to 1853, was in such rough shape that some in Fitchburg, including at least one city councilor, urged that it be torn down.

DiNatale was adamant in resisting such calls. "How can we be telling people to come to Main Street when we're not even going to put our City Hall back there?" he said. "It's a magnificent building, and it's going to be what the people of Fitchburg deserve."

"We talk a lot about market signals," said Tom Skwierawski, the city's director of community development. "It has made our job a lot easier when we're trying to sell to a new property developer or convince the state to invest in our roadway redesign when we've got scaffolding up there," he said of the City Hall project.

Skwierawski said a building a few doors down from City Hall recently sold and the buyer cited the renovations to the municipal government building and nearby Theater Block redevelopment and artists housing project in explaining what gave him confidence to make the deal. "So I think there's sense that things are happening."

Fears that the pandemic could derail revitalization efforts in Fitchburg so far have not materialized. Fitchburg State has hired a construction manager and expects to finalize design work for the theater renovation by the end of the year. The artists' housing project is moving forward, and Matt Fournier says he hopes to open the Urban Fork shared kitchen and retail space in October. Skwierawski said the city has even heard during the pandemic from two potential restaurant operators who may be interested in space near the Theater Block.

The pandemic may have slowed things down a little and “taken the foot off the gas pedal, but the vehicle’s still in drive and we’re moving,” said DiNatale.

“It’s not quick-going work,” said Joe Ferguson, the director of Reimagine North of Main, a partnership of Fitchburg businesses, nonprofits, and city government working to revitalize the lower-income neighborhood just off Main Street. “But this disinvestment didn’t happen overnight, either.”

Patricia Pistone, the vice president of strategy and innovation at the Montachusett Opportunity Council, a local social service provider, said no one is naive about the challenges Fitchburg faces or views the arts effort as the single answer to what ails it. “Arts and culture isn’t going to be a magic bullet to revitalize Fitchburg or any other community,” said Pistone. “It needs to fit into a greater story. But I do feel momentum.”

October 2020



Graduates of Fitchburg State University's (Mass.) groundbreaking police training program sit in an auditorium following social distancing guidelines. The program provides officers broader training in sociology, human services, and counseling and prepares them to address the complex needs of the communities they serve.

LOCAL

Gerard Russell, Assistant managing editor
508-793-9245
newstips@telegram.com

COLLEGE TOWN

By Scott O'Connell

Telegram & Gazette Staff

Fitchburg State graduates new officers

The third class in Fitchburg State University's police program graduated last week, the school announced.

Twenty new officers took the oath of honor at the event, held Friday. The program graduates police officers in five years with bachelor's and master's degrees as well as certification to serve on municipal forces in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

This month's graduates completed their bachelor's degrees in May, followed by a 15-week training academy over the summer. Most of them already have jobs at local police departments, according to the school.

Class leader Grant Jensen, in his remarks at the ceremony, acknowledged the 2020 class is entering a different environment from the one previous recruits experienced.

"Policing right now is in a state where most people are questioning us and asking why we think it's still worth being a police officer," he said. "These changes to a profession that we thought we were getting into has not stopped any of us from our end goal of becoming police officers ... we are a group of eager, passionate, and resilient men and women who want to make a difference within our communities we are going to serve."

FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

Center for Italian culture offers virtual book club

Submitted Article

FITCHBURG » The Center for Italian Culture at Fitchburg State University will host a virtual book club for the 2020-21 academic year, with faculty members leading community discussions.

The year's programs begin at 3 p.m. today with a discussion of some of history's worst leaders led by Professor Daniel Sarefield of the university's Economics, History and Political Science Department.

Sarefield will talk about "How to Be a Bad Emperor:

An Ancient Guide to Truly Terrible Leaders by Suetonius," edited by Josiah Osgood. Join the discussion at <https://meet.google.com/oyr-tydv-pdt> or by calling in to 1-321-586-2493 and entering PIN 111 777 099#.

Suetonius' original book, written 2,000 years ago, presents briskly paced, darkly comic biographies of Roman emperors Julius Caesar, Tiberius, Caligula and Nero.

The tales of these anti-role models show how power inflames leaders' worst tendencies, causing almost incalculable dam-

age. The book is presented in English, with the original Latin on the facing pages.

The series will continue at 3 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 11, when Professor Teresa Fava Thomas leads a discussion of "Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis," by Robert M. Edsel.

The programs conclude at 3 p.m. Thursday, March 25, when Professor Rala Diakite of the Humanities Department leads a discussion of Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio by Amara Lakhous.

LOCAL

Gerard Russell, Assistant managing editor
508-793-9245
newstips@telegram.com

COLLEGE TOWN

By Scott O'Connell

Telegram & Gazette Staff

Book club does Italian history

Fitchburg State University will host a virtual book club this year focusing on Italian history, the school recently announced.

The series, which will begin with an event at 3 p.m. Thursday, is being put on by the university's Center for Italian Culture.

Thursday's discussion, led by professor Daniel Sarefield, will focus on the book "How to Be a Bad Emperor: An Ancient Guide to Truly Terrible Leaders" by Suetonius, edited by Josiah Osgood. People can access the event by visiting <https://meet.google.com/oyr-tydv-pdt> or by calling in to 1-321-586-2493 and entering PIN 111 777 099#.

Professor Teresa Fava Thomas will lead the next talk, on Feb. 11, about Robert M. Edsel's "Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis."

The program will end on March 25 with professor Rala Diakite and a discussion of "Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio" by Amara Lakhous.

LOCAL NEWS

UPDATES AT [FACEBOOK.COM / SENTINELANDENTERPRISE](https://www.facebook.com/sentinelandenterprise) AND [TWITTER.COM / SENTANDENT](https://twitter.com/sentandent)

[sentinelandenterprise.com](https://www.sentinelandenterprise.com)

FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY



COURTESY FSU

Fitchburg State University Professor Katherine Rye Jewell was named to Library of Congress Task Force.

PROF TO LEAD LIBRARY OF CONGRESS TASK FORCE

Mission is to preserve audiovisual infrastructure

Submitted Article

FITCHBURG » Fitchburg State University Professor Katherine

Rye Jewell has been appointed co-chair of the College and Community Radio Caucus of the Library of Congress Radio Preservation Task Force, a fed-

erally mandated project created to support the preservation of the nation's audiovisual infrastructure.

Jewell, a member of the Eco-

nomics, History and Political Science Department, has long explored college radio as a research subject and is currently working on a book on the topic.

"It's very exciting," Jewell said. "I have so much respect

TASK FORCE » 6A

Task Force

FROM PAGE 3A

for the people who are doing this work. I've been exploring in the archives for so long, and it's exciting to come out and discuss what I've found."

Jewell, who was a college DJ herself, began exploring college radio as a research topic in 2014. "Within political history there has been a growing

interest in taking media history seriously," she said.

With the task force, she hopes to engage in work that will increase educational opportunities and public outreach.

"We're in a moment where college radio still exists, in more forms than it did in the past, but it still has a very diverse implication," Jewell said.

From terrestrial broadcast signals to online streaming, the medium is

evolving.

The task force's mission is to catalog, preserve, and write grants toward the maintenance of the U.S. audio-visual infrastructure.

It features representatives from over 100 universities and 45 public, federal, and academic partnerships, and is a component of the National Recording Preservation Plan of the Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Board.

COLLEGE TOWN

*FSU prof
named to
Library of
Congress
task force***By Scott O'Connell**

Telegram & Gazette Staff

FITCHBURG -

A Fitchburg State University professor has been named co-chair of the College and Community Radio Caucus of the Library of Congress Radio Preservation Task Force, the school recently announced.

Katherine Rye Jewell, a member of FSU's economics, history and political science department, has made college radio a focus of her research and is working on a book on the topic.

Jewell, a member of the economics, history and political science department, has long explored college radio as a research subject and is working on a book on the topic.

"It's very exciting," Jewell said. "I have so much respect for the people who are doing this work. I've been exploring in the archives for so long, and it's exciting to come out and discuss what I've found."

As a member of the task force, Jewell, a former college DJ herself, hopes to focus on increasing educational opportunities and public outreach related to college radio.

The task force's mission is to catalog, preserve and write grants toward the maintenance of the country's audiovisual infrastructure, according to FSU.