

Worcester's Power Players, a more definitive list

By Joyce Mandell



Giselle Rivera-Flores / For Worcester Sun

Gloria Hall, left, and Deb Cary are among the city's real "power players."

Joyce Mandell, a community development specialist, urban studies professor and self-proclaimed rabble-rouser, initiated a blog, ["Jane Jacobs in the Woo"](#) in 2016 to stimulate conversation and actions to build a vibrant Worcester, and she was a founding member of Worcester's Urban Planning Partnership (UPP). A resident of the city for over 20 years, she believes in the potential of Worcester, the power of praxis and the truth to be found both in stories and stillness. Jane Jacobs in the Woo will now be a regular feature in Worcester Sun online and in print.

Want to know who are the "power players that are shaping the city of Worcester's remarkable renaissance?" For a start, check out the roster in the [Dec. 21 MassLive article](#). If, after you do, you're feeling a bit of discomfort or unease, here may be the reason: Alban Murtishi's focus on a cohort of "movers and shakers" rests on one disturbing truth and one major fallacy.

Here is the truth: The world of major development is still a white man's game. White male businessmen, high-level public administrators and politicians have easier, more streamlined access to capital through traditional lending institutions and through the public coffers. They are predominantly dictating the development direction and priorities of Worcester.

Here is the fallacy: A revival of our built environment can't be attributed solely to its large development projects. Indeed it is the infusion of primarily large, single-use mega-projects dependent on cataclysmic money that often drains neighborhoods of active street life. Beware when the bulldozers are most active! Great neighborhoods can't be built in a day or even a year or two. Great neighborhoods are built incrementally over time with each new small business, bike lane, mural on the wall, and repurposing of an historic building.

High investors in truly vibrant neighborhoods really only come onto the scene late in the game and capitalize on the small hopeful steps that have come years before.



Chelsea Creekmore / Destination Worcester

Crompton Collective is a prime example of the Jane Jacobs ethos.

Consider the story of the slow build of the Canal District as a revitalizing neighborhood. Allen Fletcher is currently taking a brave leap to develop a large mixed-use residential/public market project on the banks of Kelley Square. This large investment seems more likely to succeed primarily because of the community-based revitalization efforts that have come together in the Canal District over the past 15 to 20 years. Fletcher has been in the trenches during this whole period in that district with other smaller projects – rehabilitating an old school on Ash Street where he lives, championing the opening of the Blackstone Canal in the past, spearheading economic development efforts through the Canal District Alliance and supporting cultural offerings including weekly summer concerts outside Crompton Place.

More importantly, Fletcher has been just one of many who have placed their bets on the Canal District during this slow build, opening up new bars and restaurants, repurposing old mill buildings into mixed retail and living units, and organizing art walks, concerts, and other cultural street celebrations. The revival of the Canal District has been built over time, incrementally through the efforts of many hands and hearts.

If we are going to honor the developers and city officials, we also have to acknowledge the role of those who create the crucial infrastructure of a vital built environment – the artists, the preservationists, the tree huggers and the tree planters, the open space advocates, those who advocate for walkability in our street design, the new urbanists, the restaurateurs and other local entrepreneurs. They too are the “power players that shape ... our remarkable renaissance.”

For every person mentioned here, there are hundreds of others who are just as important and won't be recognized in this format.

Revitalization is really a community affair. So many of us play either a large or small and supporting role in this work of city building. None of these leaders operate in a vacuum. They rely on a cohort of others – colleagues, fellow activists, those who take care of administrative details, funders, friends and family who serve as dream catchers and cheerleaders. We shouldn't detract from the praise offered to the men highlighted in the MassLive article. We should honor those who make the decision to invest financially in our city, and give a special acknowledgment to City Manager Ed Augustus, who has shown such can-do spirit in his leadership of city

government. Let us just add the following people — you might find a common thread among them — in a prominent place on the register of top power players shaping our revival:

Public Art

Erin Williams, cultural development officer, city of Worcester; executive director, Worcester Cultural Coalition

“Take a look at the new study just released on the economic impact of the arts,” Erin Williams directs excitedly to the [Arts and Economic Prosperity 5 study](#) of the national nonprofit Americans for the Arts. Data was collected from 57 Worcester-based cultural organizations from the year 2015 for this study. Additionally, 762 attendees of arts-related events in 2016 were administered questionnaires about their spending before and after arts events.

The hard facts are startling. Over \$125.7 million, creating 4,062 full-time jobs, was generated during the year through arts spending: \$64.5 million for direct arts-related spending for theater tickets, museum admissions, art purchases; and \$61.2 million for indirect spending – the restaurants that theatergoers frequent after or before a show, babysitters, parking, transportation-related costs, hotel rooms for out-of-towners, the souvenirs to remember an arts-evening-out. Williams has her fingers on the pulse of much of this creative placemaking activity and takes an organizing role on a whole range of arts endeavors including the development of WooPass and [100 events on the Common](#), as well as the designation of the Salisbury Cultural District and the creation and installation of public art through the efforts of the Public Art Working Group (PAWG).

Gloria Hall, founder and director, Art in the Park

In 2005, Art in the Park was a germ of an idea in Gloria Hall’s head when she served as a member of the Worcester Arts Council. In 2008, Art in the Park had its first large-scale sculpture exhibit in Elm Park, a place Hall envisioned as the perfect outdoor gallery space. Since its inception, Art in the Park has taken off in the hearts of locals and visitors to the city so that now its call for submissions results in applications from around the country.

In its last showing, named “Interludes,” in 2017, local school groups even got in on the act, submitting installation pieces that they made collectively in art class.

When our parks become galleries where all are free to enjoy art, then we continue to reinvent and then repopulate our community gathering places. On a sunny day during the opening times of a new exhibit, one can see the families and individuals walking the park, pointing to some sculptures and touching others. “Public art has the power to energize our public spaces,” Hall declares.



Joyce Mandell / For Worcester Sun

Ruth Seward, left, Deborah Packard and Tina Zlody continue to make their marks on the progress of the city.

Tina Zlody, co-founder and main spokesperson, stART on the Street

It all began with a small group of Worcester Artists Really Trying (WART – the first acronym!) to make a community event where art would be accessible to everyone in the city. The small first festival on Main Street in 2002 has morphed into stART on the Street, an annual daylong art and cultural celebration that takes over the main drag of Park Avenue in September; and stART at the Station, a curated handmade gift show targeted to the tastes of holiday shoppers every December at Union Station.

We co-create a vibrant Worcester when we take over, even for a day, a street designed for cars and activate the space for people-filled activity.

Tina Zlody, one of the founders of stART, ticks off the benefits of a festival that draws in over 50,000 attendees from Worcester and all over New England: the monetary support of local artists, crafters and food truck operators; the boost to retail shops open around Park Avenue during the festival; the chance to connect with the work of a variety of Worcester nonprofit organizations; the possibility of viewing the process of art making as artists weave, blow glass, sketch and draw; the peopling of Elm Park; the “shutting down of a main street and filling it with life.”

The festival functions as way to brand Worcester as a cultural destination. The economic benefit continues after the last booth is shut down on a day when business cards may have been exchanged to continue the connections that have been made. Zlody gives an anecdote about the personal impact of stART. Jessica Walsh's first major experience of Worcester was as an attendee of stART. Enamored of a city that could birth such a community-based arts day, she decided to move here, started the local business Worcester Wares that features "all-things-Worcester," and became a driver of the latest millennial-driven public art festival, POW! WOW! Worcester.

Jessica Walsh and Che Anderson, co-directors, POW! WOW! Worcester

Tavar Zawacki, an artist from Germany, came all the way to Worcester to ask his girlfriend to marry him. His mural, "The Proposal," now graces the long wall of the DCU Center on Commercial Street with the declarative question, "I Love You. Marry Me." It is half personal song to his own beloved and half inspiration for our city, where Esther Howland popularized the valentine.



Jaime Flores Photography / igworcesterna

At Worcester Ice Center, 112 Harding St. // by Earth Crusher and Five8

The mural serves as a brave attempt to remedy a true design flaw of DCU Center's half-block building façade with no doors or windows to the world that has killed off the street life on its sidewalks. The inaugural, 10-day-long mural festival in 2016 brought in over 20 artists from around the world to Worcester's downtown to splash 16 naked, drab walls with color and life.

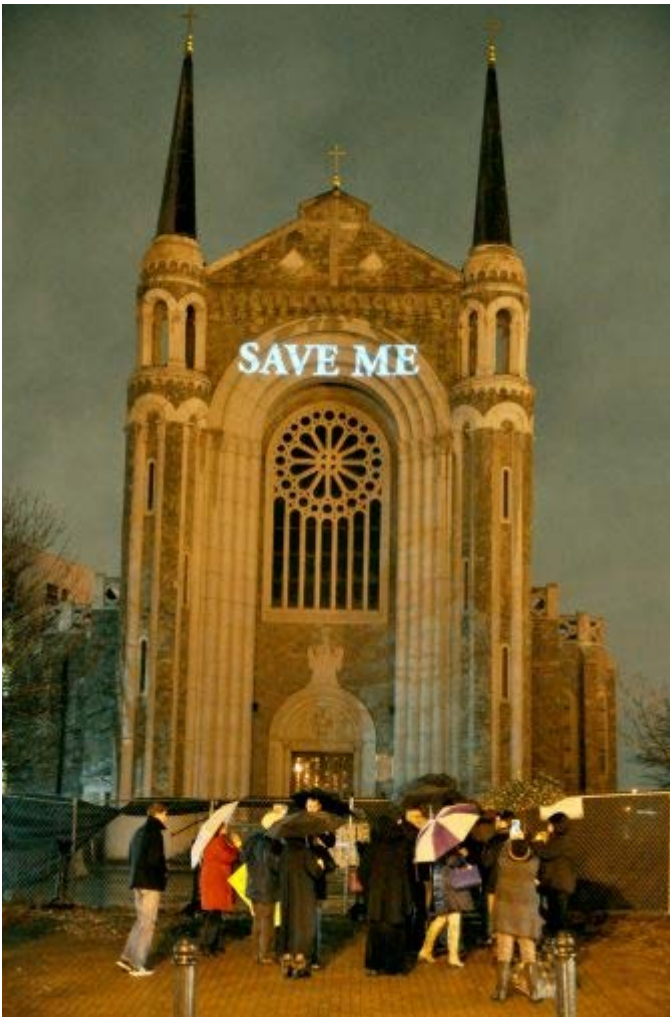
The importance of public art for lively neighborhoods was apparent during the festival. The downtown streets, normally deserted after work hours and on weekends, were now populated with visitors walking from mural to

mural, appreciating the beauty and meaning of each work. Commercial Street, the home of “The Proposal,” is now rediscovered as lovers are drawn to the mural, marriages are proposed and then happy couples adjourn to a nearby restaurant to celebrate. It’s a small story of the potential economic spin-off of areas filled with public art.

Jessica Walsh and Che Anderson are just two of a group of millennial artists and art lovers who, on their own initiative, organized and raised funds to make the festival happen here. 2017 POW! WOW! made an even bigger splash with over 50 artists painting 29 murals throughout the city in neighborhoods outside of downtown and at the Elm Park Community School.

Historic Preservation

Deborah Packard, executive director, Preservation Worcester



Courtesy Joyce Mandell

Advocates rally outside Notre Dame des Canadiens church in downtown Worcester.

Urban theorist Jane Jacobs detailed the importance of diversity of building stock in building great neighborhoods and of incremental development that includes both old and new buildings. “New ideas must use old buildings,” wrote Jacobs. “People are naturally drawn to the charm of the old,” states Deborah Packard, citing the economic success and community draw of the creative reuse of Crompton Place as an example. Smart cities know the real truth: that [adaptive reuse of historic buildings makes dollars and sense](#), and translates into

tangible economic benefits: job creation, increase in tourism, resource cost savings, downtown revitalization, niche business incubation and community branding opportunities.

Since 2016, Packard has played a lead role in organizing Reimagine Notre Dame, a grassroots group developing a reuse plan for Notre Dame des Canadiens, a building that could potentially emerge as a cornerstone of Worcester's downtown development.

Convincing the powers-that-be of the economic importance of preservation is not easy in a city that has traditionally defined cataclysmic development of large, new, single-use projects as the route to Worcester's economic progress. Yet, Packard's collaborative, consensus-building approach has led to many successes, including the saving of the historic Stearns Tavern in 2017. Preservation Worcester in collaboration with the city of Worcester was able to raise the funds and move the tavern to its current location near Coes Park. The Seven Hills Foundation will spearhead the tavern's reuse, featuring a café that will function as a workforce training program for people with disabilities. It's a new, useful life for an old building.

Walkability in Street Design

Karin Valentine Goins, co-director, WalkBike Worcester

When Karin Valentine Goins and her husband moved to Worcester in 1997, they had already tasted life in more walk-bike friendly locales in Arlington, Virginia, and Ann Arbor, Michigan. Shocked to encounter such automobile-centric street design in Worcester, Karin figured she had two options: move to another place that was more welcoming for walkers and bicyclists or stay put here and create the place she wanted to live. Luckily for us, Karin chose the latter option and has worked tirelessly to advocate for safe road design for those who want to get around Worcester sans car.

In 2011, Karin co-founded WalkBike Worcester, initially organized as a working group of the Worcester Food and Active Living Policy Council and later spun off into its own separate organization devoted to educating residents, elected officials and city government staff on ways to develop safe streets designed for all users. WalkBike Worcester has hosted neighborhood walks and bike rides, promoted "safe routes to school," set up a demonstration bike lane on Major Taylor Boulevard. It has also worked tirelessly behind the scenes for the city to adopt the Complete Streets policy that was finally passed at the end of 2017. According to Karin, building walkability in Worcester is key to our revival because walkable streets "increases your connections to neighbors, increases the independence of children who can go down the street on their own and promotes good health when we're more physically active."

City Councilor Sarai Rivera

Representing a dense, mixed-use, amenity-filled district where people by choice or necessity navigate by foot, City Councilor Sarai Rivera has always been interested in pedestrian safety and has advocated for sidewalks and streets designed for easy walking. She has participated in and tweeted about "Walk to School" days at Woodland Academy. She welcomed conversations with transportation activists at WalkBike Worcester to learn and then publicly speak about the benefits of creating walkable neighborhoods.

She makes this list because of the leadership role she took in 2017 to sponsor an order to pass a Complete Streets policy in Worcester. Under this administrative directive, the design of newly resurfaced streets will have to take into account the needs of all users of the street – pedestrians, bicyclists, riders of public transportation and car drivers. I anticipate that she will continue to be an outspoken advocate as the city moves to implement its new Complete Streets policy.

Great Open Spaces

Deb Cary, director, Broad Meadow Brook, Mass Audubon

In 2012, Deb Cary and other activists called for a task force to study the feasibility of establishing dog parks within the borders of the city. It took five years of advocacy and research. In 2017, Worcester opened up its first two official dog parks in Vernon Hill and at Beaver Brook Park.



Alex L. Khan / For Worcester Sun

Broad Meadow Brook

One doesn't have to be a dog owner or even a dog lover to know the economic justification for dog parks. If Worcester wants to attract and retain more residents who may, in fact, have four-legged friends, then we need to supply needed amenities. Great neighborhoods sport active sidewalk life and a variety of reasons for residents to walk the streets. The possibility of walking dogs to and from dog parks peoples our streets and forges connections among people in the parks.

In her role as director of Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, and as a board member for the Greater Worcester Land Trust, Deborah Cary advocates for great open green and blue spaces in Worcester including the forging of a contiguous trail system from the East to the West sides. One may be able to catch a glimpse of her all over the city – testifying before City Council, rescuing stray canoers during free summer canoeing at Green Hill Park, leading a hike on the East Side Trail or at the Broad Meadow Brook sanctuary, setting up a makeshift demonstration canal at past Blackstone Canal Festivals.

One of Worcester's greatest draws is its plethora of parks, hiking trails and open spaces that provide recreation and respite within our urban borders.

Trees

Ruth Seward, director, Worcester Tree Initiative

Ask a Burncoat neighborhood resident. One doesn't appreciate trees until one loses them in the landscape.

When the Burncoat neighborhood became ground zero for the invasion of the Asian longhorned beetle first detected in the city in 2008, Worcester Tree Initiative was formed in January 2009 to replenish contaminated and removed local trees. Just in the Burncoat neighborhood, over 90 percent of the tree stock was destroyed by

the hungry beetles. Since 2009, Worcester Tree Initiative along with the city of Worcester and Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation have planted 31,234 trees in and around Worcester.

Ruth Seward, who took over the reins from founding Director Peggy Middaugh in 2015, functions as Worcester's very own combination part Lorax, part Johnny Appleseed, directing the planting of new trees; building collaborations with schools, city government, businesses and private residents in the planting and ongoing maintenance of trees; and educating all of us about the benefits of trees in the built environment. Trees provide beauty in the landscape and shade in hot summer months. Trees are a natural mechanism to absorb stormwater. Trees pull particulates out of the air and increase oxygen to increase our physical health. According to Seward, neighborhoods with good tree coverage have reduced crime, increased property values, increased walkability of streets and more active commercial activity. "People linger longer in an area with trees," declares Seward, citing how the planting of trees really makes economic sense.

Urban Agriculture

Martha Assefa, manager, Worcester Food Policy Council

Worcester's local food economy is alive and growing with an array of farmers markets, urban farms, community gardens and restaurants that feature "farm to table" ingredients. The Worcester Regional Food Hub, founded by the Regional Environmental Council, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Worcester County Food Bank in 2014, is giving extra life to the food economy in two ways: by linking local farmers in the region to markets in the city, and by providing access to a commercial-grade kitchen to incubate startup food-based small businesses. Tenants of the commercial kitchen who take advantage of culinary training and small business skill building are bringing new foods to market – new jellies, baked goods, juices, pickles.

Worcester's Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) has designated access to healthy foods as one of its key priorities in trying to make Worcester one of the healthiest cities in the country. In her staff role at the Worcester Food Policy Council, Martha Assefa is a key figure in building a robust food economy. One will see her often at community events around the city, usually clipboard in hand, gathering signatures for a range of initiatives – the fight for \$15 livable minimum wage campaign; the passing of an Urban Agriculture Ordinance in Worcester; or getting progressive candidates for local office on the ballot, including her husband, Dante Comparetto, who has most recently been elected to the School Committee.

The Urban Agriculture Ordinance that Assefa and other local activists testified about at City Council in 2017 is meant to update the zoning codes to permit farm stands, farmers markets and small-scale urban agriculture in residential neighborhoods. One can count the numerous economic benefits of prioritizing a healthy food economy — income generation, healthy food that can be grown instead of bought, branding of Worcester as a tourist destination for "foodies," preservation of green spaces that beautify our neighborhoods and the building of public gathering spots that results in connective neighborhood life.

Local-first Businesses

Amy Chase, owner, Crompton Collective



Patrick Sargent / For Worcester Sun

Crompton Place

The strength of the local economy is dependent on the incubation of its own locally grown small businesses that become magnets for residents and outsiders alike. National chain restaurants and retail stores can be found anywhere USA. What stores or restaurants do we have that are particularly unique to Worcester that can serve as destinations in themselves? In 2012, Amy Chase opened a new retail establishment in Crompton Place, a creative mixed-use reuse of the historic Crompton Mills building. Chase refers to her store as a “curated boutique marketplace designed to celebrate our local independent gift makers and our love of old things. It’s a one-stop shop for unique gifts, antiques, handmade items, vintage treasures, shabby chic furniture, distinctive home decor, or even just a little creative inspiration.”

The [local multiplier effect](#) of such homegrown businesses like Crompton Collective is real. According to studies by the Institute of Local Self Reliance, 45 cents of every dollar spent at a locally owned business is recirculated in the local economy. In comparison, every dollar spent at a national big-box chain only recoups 14 cents to benefit the local economy. Crompton Collective features the wares of over 99 local craftsmen, collectors and other vendors who will in turn most likely spend their profits in the Worcester area.

It takes vision and elbow grease to create a pleasing city. The people mentioned here are some of the standouts who have tended their patch of that vision quietly and well, to the benefit of all.