



EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND OPPORTUNITY:

# BERKSHIRE REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION CEDS PROCESS

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AUGUST 2023 // CASE STUDY PREPARED BY NADO RESEARCH FOUNDATION





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Program Manager**August 2023***EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND  
OPPORTUNITY:  
BERKSHIRE REGIONAL  
PLANNING COMMISSION  
CEDS PROCESS**

When Laura Brennan moved to the Berkshires region in western Massachusetts, she often heard mention of the shuttered [General Electric transformer manufacturing facility](#). The mammoth site provided good-paying jobs with accessible career paths for more than 10,000 community members at the height of operations. At first, the plant's lingering shadow seemed so present, she assumed it had closed relatively recently. She was surprised to learn GE closed the factory in the 1980s.

For years, economic development efforts in the region focused on recruiting a major company that could fill its GE-shaped hole. As Economic Development Program Manager for the [Berkshire Regional Planning Commission \(BRPC\)](#), Brennan was tasked with completing the region's Economic Development District designation process in 2022. Engaging with the community to deliver its first [Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy \(CEDS\)](#), she and other BRPC staff worked with regional partners to identify and strengthen emerging economic opportunities and leverage the diverse assets the community has had all along.

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**Background: Effective Collaboration**

Today, although its population is trending downward overall, the rural, one-county region on Massachusetts' southwestern edge attracts newcomers with growing healthcare and social services sectors, a modest cost of living, and a bucolic environment. The region has a reputation for collaboration and community activism, and is home to hundreds of non-profit associations devoted to arts, culture, and social services.

Other than Pittsfield, the county seat, none of the region's 32 municipalities has a population higher than 20,000, so collaboration is key to increasing visibility and a sense of regional identity relative to high-profile urban metros nearby. However, in facing the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, Brennan and her colleagues in the region quickly realized that their efforts were not really structured for effective coordinated action – particularly in response to economic shocks.

"During COVID, we started making warm referrals between organizations. They made more sense than what we'd been doing before, because we were actually working together, and had come to better understand what each other does," Brennan said. "The gears were already in place, but we were making the wheels spin faster."

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# Effective COLLABORATION

"The gears were already in place, but we were making the wheels spin faster."

Laura Brennan  
Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

**Context: From Response to Strategy**

After their effective collaborative COVID response, leaders on the stakeholder committee for BRPC's first CEDS process were better positioned to engage strategically with diverse communities by leveraging their experiences and expanding connections.

"People are surveyed- and meeting-ed out. So it was important that we find alternative ways and places to reach folks, to piggyback on activities that are already happening," said Wylie Goodman, BRPC's Senior Planner for Economic Development. "Especially in rural communities, there are so many people who are already volunteering and doing community work. We had to come to it with some humility about how much everyone was already doing and make it as easy and as fun as possible for them to participate."

Three organizations formed in the region at the same time the CEDS was being developed and were engaged by BRPC as part of the CEDS planning process: the [Berkshire Black Economic Council](#), [Blackshires](#), and [Latinas 413](#). Formally and informally, each group helped ensure the CEDS process heard and responded to the circumstances and experiences of all community members, especially those who may otherwise not have been well-represented.

The new emphasis on inclusive outreach revealed, for example, that funding opportunities meant to bolster economic resilience during the pandemic were inaccessible to many of the region's small businesses. Many who otherwise qualified for relief simply lacked the financial structure necessary to apply for it.

Ensuring everyone in the community is resilient to future economic shocks was a top priority for the CEDS committee. "We are a small enough region that we can do this," Brennan said. "We know who our neighbors are. We can close the gaps in that ecosystem of business support, so that no matter who you are, you have access to support when you need it."

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**Regional Solution: A Framework for Inclusive Economic Development**

To ensure that equity was woven into the [very framework of its CEDS](#), BRPC approached the process with a *People-Community-Economy* framework. The framework centers people as the agents and beneficiaries of economic development work, recognizing that it is individuals who form communities and build economies. Approaching the CEDS process with this framework in mind helped ensure that the needs of people—and their diverse experiences with community and economic development—were at the center of the project. BRPC's CEDS includes strategies for leveraging the increased diversity of newcomers moving into the region, including immigrants and refugees from all over the world, to inspire creative entrepreneurship and innovation. In the last six months, four new restaurants and shops with ethnic cuisine and culturally diverse products opened on Pittsfield's Main Street.

Workforce development strategies are another key to diversifying the economy and increasing access to high-wage job opportunities. BRPC's CEDS goals include both recruiting and growing companies offering high-wage jobs on the frontier of technological advancement in their fields, in conjunction with workforce training programs. One program being implemented to achieve this goal is the EDA-funded [Berkshire Innovation Center Manufacturing Academy](#), which will partner with local industry, as well as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to help workers upskill and companies conduct research and development to diversify production using existing equipment.

Brennan emphasized that intentional, step-by-step forward progress is key to the region's commitment to diversifying its economy and pursuing more inclusive economic development as BRPC and its partners implement the region's first CEDS.

***"We recognize that this is just very early, somewhat floundering attempts to do a better job of inclusion," she said. "We still have miles and miles and miles to go."***





## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**\* Partner effectively with organizations representing diverse communities.** To better respond to challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, economic development stakeholders in the BRPC region began working together strategically, where before they had just been keeping tabs on each other. They also found better ways to collaborate with organizations who could enhance their connectedness to diverse community members.

**\* A resilient economy offers more opportunity for everyone.** BRPC's CEDS seeks to not only diversify the economy but also increase participation in entrepreneurial activities and traditional employment for people who face economic and social barriers. Tactics include small business support and workforce training opportunities for people interested in manufacturing and other careers. A diverse economy provides accessible high-income job opportunities for more people, and a highly-skilled workforce can help attract and build a resilient economy characterized by diverse, more competitive industries.

**\* Start where you are and commit to improvement.** Brennan acknowledges that BRPC is just at the beginning of its efforts to effectively include the entire community in a vibrant and resilient economy. Ongoing progress evaluation will lead to adjusting tactics as necessary. Truly equitable economic development requires not only a willingness to try new short-term tactics, but also a commitment to adjust as needed and incorporate what works into new systems for resilient, long-term solutions.



## BERKSHIRE REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION KEY STATISTICS

**Region Characteristics:** Natural Amenity

Destination Region, Retirement Destination Region

**Population (2020):** 125,927

**Area (Square Miles):** 8,988

**Non-white Share of Population (2020):** 12.3%

### National Resources for Inclusive Economic Development Strategies

[New Growth Innovation Network \(NGIN\)](#): NGIN provides disciplined practice and product innovation as well as expertise and resources to practitioners and communities. It also serves as a thought center to help leadership implement an inclusive approach to driving economic growth. NGIN has recently released the [Inclusive Recovery Toolkit](#) in partnership with the NADO Research Foundation to support regional economic development leaders in elevating equity within their organization, planning and CEDS development, and strategy and implementation.

[Argonne National Laboratory National Economic Resilience Research Center \(NERRC\)](#): NERRC provides innovative and transparent economic data access, research, and analysis to support and strengthen economic development and resilience in communities across the nation.

[National Community Reinvestment Coalition \(NCRC\)](#): NCRC works to promote fair lending and financial inclusion in underserved communities. It provides resources, research, and advocacy to organizations to ensure that economic development benefits all community members.

[Association for Enterprise Opportunity \(AEO\)](#): AEO is an organization that focuses on microbusiness development and entrepreneurship. It provides resources, training, and networking opportunities for organizations to support the economic inclusion of marginalized communities.