

The Economic Development Administration advises CEDS Committees to begin their work by conducting a SWOT analysis of the regional economy. The process involves identifying “the critical internal and external factors that speak to the region’s unique assets and competitive positioning.” Once complete, the SWOT serves as a strategic planning tool that allows stakeholders to arrive at clear objectives for strengthening the regional economy, informed by a deeper understanding of local capabilities and capacity. More succinctly, the SWOT aims to capture a moment in time in the life of a region by answering the question, “Where are we now?” In light of the shock Berkshire County and the nation experienced, and continues to face, due to COVID-19, answering that question requires re-examining our past and organizing our collective focus to achieving our future aspirations.

The Berkshires' **Strengths** are manifold, owing **historically** to the creative vitality of our world-class **cultural institutions** (e.g., Jacob's Pillow, The Clark); the **natural beauty** of our mountains (Mt. Greylock, the State's highest peak), forests (October Mountain State Park, the State's largest), and waterfalls (Bash Bish Falls, the State's highest); the bounty of our **farm heritage**; and our enviable **geography** within reach of two great urban centers, making us, for centuries, a destination for respite for some of the world’s most brilliant thinkers (e.g., W. E. B. DuBois), innovators (the Shakers at Hancock), and creators (e.g., Herman Melville, Edith Wharton).

The **Strengths** that defined the Berkshire’s status in earlier, more bucolic times, still enhance the region’s “brand recognition” today. Nonetheless, the region’s stakeholders – public, private, and philanthropic – have never rested on those laurels and, instead, have continued reimagining the region’s assets for both the current moment and a future not fully known.

In the **Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation** sector, we are now home to modern institutions that are second to none (e.g., MASS MoCA, Norman Rockwell Museum) and have set our sights on promising new creative ventures that themselves are poised to be iconic (e.g., Extreme Model Railroad and Contemporary Architecture Museum; Kemble Street Studios).

Surrounded by nature, we continue finding ways to support its conservation while creating sustainable tourism opportunities that expand our burgeoning **Outdoor Recreation** economy (e.g., Greylock Glen; the Adventure Trail).

**Regional Agriculture**, long a beloved part of our identity, became critical during COVID. Farms pivoted to addressing food insecurity for people and places never previously served and a renewed influx of funding will allow us to improve our food supply chain, increase access to local food for our most vulnerable residents, and grow sales for local food producers (e.g., Berkshire Agricultural Ventures, Berkshire Grown), thereby moving the Berkshires closer to Food Solutions New England's goal to produce at least 30% of our food within the boundaries of New England by 2030.

As for the Berkshires’ reputation as a place where thinkers come to rejuvenate, that image too has taken on new life, fueled by growing interest in **remote work**. During the pandemic, the

region reported its lowest decline in population loss) and a **still nascent population rise** not seen in decades. Many of those newcomers were **urban transplants** who brought with them a desire to marry the best of city life (vibrant downtowns, high-quality food and retail, bike- and pedestrian-friendly communities) with rural amenities (clean air, safety, larger dwellings, and access to outdoor recreation). If the two can meet halfway, the Berkshires could soon become a place for not only temporary rejuvenation but also where residents can realize the **live-work balance** so many have sought as a result of the pandemic.

Related areas of **Strength** similarly demonstrate why Berkshire County is growing better positioned for success in a post-COVID world.

- We have re-embraced our **Forests** for their power to mitigate the extremes of climate change that have devastated so many other areas of the country. While Berkshire County is not immune to negative climate impacts, our highly forested landscape has led to cleaner air and more temperate conditions, making the region attractive to those fleeing storm, fire, and flood-ravaged states;
- Our former **Textile Mills**, home to polluting industries at the turn of the century, are being redeveloped into new engines of commerce (Greylock Mill), mixed-use housing (Eagle Mill) and advanced manufacturing or value-added processing (Niagara Mills) giving them and the communities that surround them a new lease on life;.
- Stately **Victorian homes** and abandoned roadside **motels** are again attracting attention from new owners, who began modernizing these properties during COVID, making them attractive destinations again for tourism and tourism jobs;
- Even our **railroads** are seeing a revival, as formerly backburnered projects like the Berkshire Flyer and East-West Rail spring to life anew. With support from the Federal government and Commonwealth, this new infusion of enthusiasm and resources will allow us to strengthen connections between urban and rural centers, so needed for connecting our people to knowledge and jobs.

But perhaps the greatest new Strength Berkshire County is seeing since the last CEDS is the **diversification of our human capital**. And through greater collaboration among leaders of industry (e.g., Berkshire Innovation Center), investment (e.g., Lever, Mill Town Capital), and immigrant and BIPOC entrepreneurs (e.g., Latinas413, Berkshire Black Economic Council, Blackshires), we have demonstrated that the Berkshires embodies a region where small-town values and state-of-the-art technology are not mutually exclusive to progress.