

The Berkshire Eagle

[Home](#) [News](#) [Sports](#) [Opinion](#) [Business](#) [Entertainment](#) [Obits](#) [Lifestyles](#) [Social](#) [Special Sections](#)

Diversifying Berkshire economy

Posted: 05/07/2011 12:09:21 AM EDT

Saturday May 7, 2011

WASHINGTON

Congratulations, Stuart Chase, on being named CEO of 1Berkshire, the recently-formed umbrella organization whose mission is to foster economic development in the county and to coordinate the efforts of the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, Visitors Bureau and Creative Economy Council. You bring to the post an outstanding track record as a leader at the Berkshire Museum, the Clark Art Institute, and other museums and non-profit organizations.

Without question, tourism and the arts are vital to our economy. Having been involved in the arts myself as an event and media producer, marketer, photographer and cultural consumer, I have no doubt that there is much more we could and should do to strengthen and diversify the creative economy and bring more visitors.

In 2007 and 2008, in a debate on the editorial pages and in the columns of The Eagle, I advocated presenting popular music at Tanglewood, where it had a regular home in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I'm glad to see the occasional pop performance (other than our go-to-guy James Taylor) has expanded to the Popular Artist Series. The Tanglewood Jazz Festival, created by my friend, the venerable jazz impresario Fred Taylor, has become a regular feature and audience draw on Labor Day weekend. Wilco's successful Solid Sound Festival last summer returns this year to Mass MoCA. Under your leadership, I'm sure we'll see many more additions to the creative economy.

One immediate challenge you face is how, with gas now topping \$4 a gallon, to make our area more attractive and accessible to visitors. A proposed rail line from Pittsfield to Danbury, CT, with connections on to New York, is at best a very long-term solution, if not an impractical dream, and will not solve the problem of getting people here this season and next. Tour packages with transportation, housing and tickets may be one answer, organized rideshares another, existing rail lines from Boston yet another.

I also urge you to look beyond the old reliable playbook of tourism and the arts. Even with our amazing cultural attractions, the Berkshires cannot thrive on bread-and-circuses alone, which for the most part provide low-paying service jobs. The economic potential of this area is so much greater. It may be rural with its pastures, woodlands, hills and waterways, but it's also home (or second home) to many talented people, wonderful sources of food, and world-class institutions. This unique "ruralopolitan" character of the Berkshires makes it attractive to people like me who choose to relocate here as a place to live and do business.

Because many Berkshirites work, either at home or in an office, in towns without high-speed Internet service, making such connections widely available is vital to economic development in the county. I'm a volunteer with

WiredWest, a cooperative effort of 47 towns in Western Massachusetts to build a locally-owned fiber-optic network to provide broadband services to homes and businesses. With this network the Berkshires can compete with anywhere else in the country, or the world for that matter, as a place to live and work. Without it, unwired areas of the county will become economic deadzones.

Another major challenge we face is the massive outflow of money from the region to energy suppliers both domestic and foreign. We must develop renewable energy sources here which keep those dollars in the local economy. Crane & Company, not only a mainstay of the Berkshire economy but one of the oldest companies in the U.S, will be using energy from the state-of-the-art biomass facility now under development by Berkshire Generations. We should be encouraging homeowners and business people to work with local companies and contractors to put solar panels on rooftops throughout the county.

According to a new report from UMass, economic growth in the commonwealth for the first quarter of 2011 was 4.2 percent, more than double the national rate of 1.8 percent. This growth was largely driven by the technology sector. We have a few outstanding technology companies in the county like Sabic and General Dynamics, but with our unique lifestyle, a new business incubator and investment capital we could attract more tech firms, especially startup and entrepreneurial ones which create jobs.

I not only urge you to think outside the box of tourism and the arts, but beyond the lines on a map which define Berkshire County. WiredWest, for example, encompasses Berkshire and adjacent counties in Massachusetts. I'm sure there will be other opportunities to partner with organizations east of us to the Connecticut River and west to the Hudson.

Vision is seeing beyond the known to the possible. That's what is needed at 1Berkshire, and as a man of the arts, you will I'm sure bring such vision to your new position and to the Berkshires.

Steve Nelson is founder and CEO of Solar Electric Service Corporation.