



Pioneer Valley Planning Commission paints positive, yet fragile, picture of the local economy

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Timothy Brennan, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, stands in front of the Union Station Intermodal Transportation and Rail Center in Springfield. The center is among \$1.1 billion in projects under way or committed in the region. *(The Republican / Mark M. Murray)*

Jim Kinney, The Republican By **Jim Kinney, The Republican**

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SPRINGFIELD — The Greater Pioneer Valley is home to \$1.1 billion in committed construction, development and expansion projects, according to a new and generally positive report from the **Pioneer Valley Planning Commission**.

"We constantly compare ourselves to Boston, and that means every bit of growth we have looks lukewarm instead of red hot," said Timothy W. Brennan, executive director of the commission.

But even lukewarm progress is a fragile thing, Brennan said, especially with a government shutdown and possible budget default looming. Brennan and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission advise 43 cities and towns in Hampden and Hampshire counties on land use, transportation and development policy.

"We see it every day. We seek federal grants for transportation, recreation, water, soil and air quality," Brennan said. "What happens if no one is there to take those calls? Think about the employees at Westover Air Reserve Base and Barnes Air National Guard Base."

The report details both public and private projects. That includes the \$6.3 million expansion at U.S. Tsubaki Transmission division in Holyoke and the \$59.4 million expansion and renovation at **MassMutual Financial Group** in Springfield. Public projects include the \$83 million **Union Station** Intermodal Transportation and Rail Center renovations in Springfield.

It's not on the list, but Brennan pointed to the May grand opening of **Gulfstream Aerospace Corp.'s** 125,000-square-foot, \$23-million maintenance hangar at Westfield Barnes Regional Airport. That facility, designed to service the next generation of larger corporate jets, meant about 100 added jobs in Westfield.

"People don't realize there are private companies making investments and adding jobs," Brennan said. "It's going on all over the valley. People just don't always see it."

The report, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Annual Report, is an update of the regional Plan for

Progress documents created in 1994 and updated ever since.

Filing the report every year is a requirement if the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission wishes to help local communities tap into federal economic development funds, Brennan said.

The report also details that total payroll in the region went up 2.2 percent from \$9 billion to \$9.2 billion in 2011, the most recent year for which comprehensive data is available. The rate of violent crime also fell 11.8 percent, from 3.4 incidents reported per 100 persons in 2010 to 3 crimes per 100 in 2011.

From 2011 to 2012, home prices and MCAS scores also improved, again, according to the most recent data available to the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

Worryingly for Brennan, the region's high-school drop-out rate rose from 4.3 percent in 2010 to 4.8 percent in 2011, again according to the most recent statistics the Planning Commission could acquire.

"That's something we have to address if we are going to attract more employment to the area," he said.

Employers need a trained work force. It's one reason the report picks up on the ongoing Knowledge Corridor theme, an effort to leverage the colleges and universities. The report also calls for cross-border collaboration with Greater Hartford and a focus on growing industry clusters, such as medical devices. Sustainability, like mass transportation, also is a goal, as is a planned investment in urban development to attract people to downtowns.

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