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Now a beacon for buyers priced out of Boston, Worcester, the state's second-largest city, is getting buzz

By [Andy Rosen](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 11, 2021, 12:00 a.m.



People walked past a mural on the side of Broth Ramen Bar on Green Street in late June. Street art like this covers the commercial buildings in the city's Canal District. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Ashley Pirez never gave Worcester much thought before she enrolled at Assumption University 14 years ago. Even though she grew up 20 minutes away, her vision of the city as a drab collection of shopping centers didn't hold much appeal.

But once she arrived, Pirez never wanted to leave. She and her wife bought a home in

2012 in a short sale as the area sputtered out of the Great Recession. Next month, they are set to close on a new, larger place just over the border in Holden. It was different this time, as the couple navigated through what has become a sizzling market full of all-cash offers and waived home inspections.

The experience has been in some ways head-spinning, but in other ways, Pirez said, it was only a matter of time before the world at large caught on to the appeal she's seen for years in New England's second-largest city.

“Worcester is such a cool place to be, and I didn't know it existed,” Pirez said of her youth. Now developments, including the arrival of the [Worcester Red Sox](#), are driving that point home. “As you see things like that happen, everything else is like a domino effect: OK. There's more to do here.”

The opening of the WooSox's Polar Park has put a spotlight on a city and a region that have often stood in the shadow of Boston and even smaller cities such as Providence. With home prices out of reach for many in Greater Boston, Worcester's transit connections, resilient economy, and increasingly cosmopolitan setting are looking more attractive.



WooSox fans posed for a selfie in front of Polar Park as storms threatened to delay the game. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Priced out and heading west

Even as home values rise rapidly in many parts of the state, Worcester and its surrounding county remain relative bargains in Massachusetts. The median single-family home price in Worcester this year through May was \$320,000, according to The Warren Group, a data firm. That's up more than 100 percent from a decade ago but significantly below home costs in the Boston area, where comparable prices are around \$650,000.

Worcester County, the state's largest by land area and second-largest by population, is seeing similar dynamics. The median single-family home price of \$350,000 is up 17 percent over last year and 80 percent since 2011.

Timothy M. Warren Jr., chief executive of The Warren Group, said that Worcester is seeing spillover from a persistently expensive Boston-area housing market and that the city has assets that position it to cash in on that dynamic for the long run.

"Because it was hit hard by the Great Recession, it has quite a bit of room to grow," Warren said of the Worcester area. "The state, and the whole country, is running out of prospective buyers who can pay \$1 million or \$750,000 for a home."

An analysis by the real estate services firm CBRE found that moves from Greater Boston to the Worcester area rose by 11.3 percent in 2020.

For office workers who embraced telecommuting during the pandemic, Worcester, population 185,000, might prove to be a draw for its city living at exurban prices.

Worcester, after all, has been building up cultural and practical reasons to live there for several years. It's closely tied to Boston, in spite of its distance, by the Massachusetts Turnpike and the MBTA Commuter Rail (the MBTA has not yet said what will become of the express trains it ran before the pandemic cratered ridership). Worcester Regional Airport is preparing to mark the resumption of direct flights between the city and New York in August.

An economic renewal

Worcester also has shored up its economic base — still relatively strong in manufacturing compared with the Boston area — with growing health care and education sectors built around its cluster of colleges, UMass Memorial Medical Center, and other health care facilities.

Meanwhile, the city’s coup in drawing the Red Sox’s top minor-league affiliate away from Pawtucket, R.I., has highlighted Worcester’s efforts to create a cultural center of gravity that can distinguish it from New England’s other midsized cities.

The [Canal District](#) surrounding the new ballpark bustles in the afternoon as patrons and diners make their way among shops, restaurants, and the massive [Worcester Public Market](#) in this historic stretch of mill buildings. The area continues to grow, with a [13-story mixed-use development planned for Green Street](#) and a [six-story building pursuing lab tenants near the ballpark](#).



The Harding Green mixed-use development in Worcester’s Kelley Square is home to Wachusett Brew Yard, Worcester Public Market, and apartments. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/THE BOSTON GLOBE

It's the kind of redevelopment around old industrial assets that many cities dream of, and business people across the city are hoping that visitors will venture outward from the new attraction to find other reasons to explore Worcester's multicultural dining and entertainment scene.

Boosters hope the recent development will do away with any sense that the area is something of a flyover city, a reputation Worcester has sometimes struggled to square with its nickname: "The Heart of the Commonwealth." The Smithsonian Channel's "[Aerial America](#)," for example, ran a whole hour on Massachusetts in 2020 and neglected to mention Worcester County, let alone Worcester, even once. It just bounced from Lowell to Amherst without a nod. (Note: The official geographic center of the state is in the town of Rutland, according to the Worcester Telegram & Gazette.)



The Worcester city flag flies above Polar Park, which is home to the Worcester Red Sox, a Triple-A affiliate that used to play in Pawtucket, R.I. NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/THE BOSTON GLOBE

This newfound fame will have its price

The awakening is sure to create new challenges of its own. The city is quickly becoming harder to afford.

“It’s tough because when you put together an offer, you’re going up against a lot of people who are from the outskirts of Boston. So people are definitely coming this way,” said [Monique Frigon, a real estate agent with RE/Max Diverse in Worcester](#) — though she said there are still plenty of good deals outthere for those who understand the market.

The rapid development is also chafing longtimers who call the region home, feeding worries about parking traffic and other concerns ratcheting up with the increase in visitors and new residents

And the increase in home values, if a hopeful sign about the desirability of Worcester, also requires careful analysis as civic leaders seek to maintain the affordability that has made it the multicultural urban center that it is now.

“The same thing is happening everywhere, because we’re just not constructing enough homes in Massachusetts,” [David Sullivan, economic development fellow at the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce](#), said of the rapid increase in home prices.

Worcester considers itself the center of the Commonwealth — the heart on its street signs is a sweet reminder — and it won’t be ignored any longer.



The street signs around Worcester feature a heart logo, denoting the city's nickname as "The Heart of the Commonwealth."
NATHAN KLIMA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/THE BOSTON GLOBE



Lock 50 Restaurant & Wine Bar, an upscale business on Water Street, abuts a former mill that was converted into housing.
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