

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

# CEOs create Berks Alliance to transform the community

**The nonprofit recently turned over operations to the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance.**

*BY LISA SCHEID  
READING EAGLE*



READING EAGLE: BILL UHRICH

John Weidenhammer, left; Reading Mayor Wally Scott, center; and Randy Peers, president and CEO of the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, at a June dedication of new Reading police motorcycles, funded by the Berks Alliance.

A Berks County organization has been working behind the scenes for the last three years to bolster economic development efforts in Reading.

The group, composed of CEOs with the county's largest employers, called the Berks Alliance, has been studying turnarounds in communities from Lancaster to Philadelphia to Chattanooga, Tenn., and disbursing money aimed at building community health, wealth and educational attainment.

While not directly tied to economic development, these factors are the foundation for a community's successful

economic growth, which also includes attracting business and supporting current businesses.

Last month, Berks Alliance entered a "strategic alignment" that will bring the Berks Alliance under the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance's operational control.

GRCA will provide management and project implementation support, while the Berks Alliance board will retain its oversight and governance authority of its projects.

The Berks Alliance has identified key goals and strategic investments for the greater Reading area that complement much of the existing economic development work the GRCA already has undertaken, GRCA President and CEO Randy Peers said in a press release.

“With our strategic focuses on downtown revitalization and workforce development, this move was a natural one,” he said. “The support and energy of the Berks Alliance will be a tremendous asset to the GRCA, and we in turn can provide them with the staff support necessary to implement community development priorities.”

Peers will become the parttime executive director of the Berks Alliance, reporting to the Berks Alliance board and its chairman, John Weidenhammer. David Myers, director of Alvernia University’s O’Pake Institute, will continue as a part-time staffer.

Berks Alliance is funded by contributions from companies or foundations. Its website lists these organizations as investors: Albright College, Alvernia University, BB&T, Barbey Foundation/Reading Eagle Company, Brentwood Industries, East Penn Manufacturing Co., Enersys, The Friends of Reading Hospital, Fulton Bank, Gaming and Leisure Properties Inc., Penske Truck Leasing, Reading Area Community College, Tower Health, The Wyomissing Foundation, Tompkins VIST Bank, United Way of Berks County and Weidenhammer Systems Corp.

### **Roots in Reading Health project**

Weidenhammer said Berks Alliance grew from a 2015 Reading Health System board task force called Mission Leadership. Reading Health System was the predecessor of Tower Health. The task force was a group of board members charged with looking at how the hospital could use its resources to benefit the community, said Weidenhammer, who was a part of the effort.

The thinking was that the hospital focused inward on healing people and not economic development, Weidenhammer said. This was an opportunity not only to create a better environment in which people could live, but would benefit the growing health system.

“The wellspring of a successful health system is the people you employ,” Weidenhammer said.

Faced with retiring doctors and others commuting from affluent areas outside the county, Weidenhammer said, “We just felt it had to be different.”

Weidenhammer was candid about the research.

“We were looking for a silver bullet, the one thing that we could get involved in that would make all the difference,” he said.

There was none.

“We started studying what other cities were doing,” he said.

They visited and talked with leaders of Lancaster; Phoenixville; West Chester; Greenville, S.C.; Chatanooga, Tenn.; Cleveland; and Philadelphia.

Each city was unique and had a unique process.

“We detected one common theme: Each city had a backbone organization, one group that over a sustained period of time would stick together and press forward,” Weidenhammer said.

‘Secret sauce’

They were particularly fascinated by the transformation of West Philadelphia, where John Fry, the president of Drexel University, has been fostering economic development. Fry had been a catalyst in Lancaster while he was president of Franklin & Marshall College.

“We went to meet with Fry in early 2016 to see what is the secret sauce,” Weidenhammer said.

Weidenhammer asked Fry, “If there is one thing you could do to jump-start revitalization, what would it be?”

Weidenhammer took away from that conversation the idea of getting large, influential businesses and nonprofits to invest time and treasure to support the project.

“We heard that and it resonated,” Weidenhammer said. “We vowed as the mission leadership task force that we would create such an enterprise, starting with the Reading Hospital.”

The hospital would be the backbone organization to fund this new enterprise over five years, not out of philanthropy, but out of what Weidenhammer calls enlightened self-interest.

The goal was to create a rising tide that would lift all boats, he said.

The focus would be on community development, not economic development.

Weidenhammer and a few other hospital task force members set out to recruit other anchor institutions, those likely to be around in 25 to 50 years, asking them to provide financial support for the group.

“The great thing about working with anchor institutions: We have a source of patient capital, and they can plan in very, very long horizons,” Weidenhammer said.

The selling point was the collective impact of investing together. Change in any community takes time to happen. It requires leaders to pursue goals despite criticism and lack of understanding.

“We wanted only CEOs to be part of this group,” Weidenhammer said. “Busy people lose attention quickly. If we accomplish nothing else getting together four or five times a year, that’s worthwhile.”

Weidenhammer said the group spent more than a year trying to figure out what they wanted to do.

“Most of these people wanted to build something,” he said. “We took time to refocus.”

### **Working on many fronts**

The community already has economic development people who focus on buildings and businesses. What was needed was a focus on community development. Berks Alliance operates as a community influencer, Weidenhammer said.

Some of the small early projects: \$50,000 to help the city buy two motorcycles for police patrols; greening on Penn Street; and \$50,000 allocated for city facade improvements. The first Reading Rising event was sponsored by Berks Alliance, Weidenhammer said, as were a number of community conversations bringing in speakers from other communities.

On Oct. 23, Berks Alliance brought Fry in to talk about his work at Drexel. Weidenhammer said about 200 people showed up. It wasn’t Fry’s first visit to Berks. In April, he was here when Tower Health and Drexel announced their partnership to bring a four-year medical school to Berks County.

Now the Berks Alliance is looking to make more investments, according to Peers and Weidenhammer.

Here are a few:

18th Wonder and West Reading Comprehensive Plan implementation.

College Community-Based Work Study Program, which will provide funding for an impactful educational and workforce initiative that leverages state funding through PHEAA and will provide support for small businesses seeking to employ participating students;

Downtown Reading Revitalization Partnership, an existing public-private partnership that remains a priority for the city administration, Berks County Community Foundation and the GRCA, and focuses on activities like façade improvement, greening of Penn Street and strategic planning. Related to this priority is connecting revitalization efforts to those of the South of Penn task force, which is led by the Wyomissing Foundation.

Supporting GRCA efforts to restore passenger rail service to the Reading area. “It’s such a generator of economic value,” Weidenhammer said. “It’s almost a must-do. It’s probably more important than fixing Route 222. We’re planting seeds for trees that we’re not going to sit under.”

Convening a series of important community conversations on topics impacting the health, wealth and educational attainment of the greater Reading area.

“I’m confident the role that we are trying to play in the community will yield great results, and we have a chance to be transformational,” Weidenhammer said. “It’s not easy work. Not everyone is as patient as I am. We need a big vision for Berks County. We need a belief that we can achieve. We have all the raw material to do what Lancaster or Allentown has done.”

The pace of change needs to accelerate, he said.

“That’s hard on people, and communities are resistant to change,” he said. “We tend to think that there is a greater likelihood that things get worse rather than better. But you can’t grow and get better and stay in the same place.”

Echoing what he heard from other transforming cities, he said, “If you are maintaining the status quo, you are managing a decline.”

Weidenhammer said the group wants to be in a position to invest \$400,000 a year and it wants to be a catalytic investor, leveraging its money to yield much more.

Peers said having the level of engagement from business leaders is extraordinary, and that bringing community and economic development together will amplify efforts to attract and retain talent.

Contact **Lisa Scheid**: 610-371-5049 or [lscheid@readingeagle.com](mailto:lscheid@readingeagle.com)