

## Executive Summary

**SPARK—Stimulating Potential, Accessing Resource Knowledge**—is a business and social venture accelerator initiative that emphasizes a whole-community approach to entrepreneurship, individual learning, and leadership training. **SPARK** will leverage and maximize community revitalization tools from a broad-based collaborative of partners from non-profit, government, private business and higher education, collectively linked through the **SPARK** website and digital interface and accessible online and at numerous human-driven public networking sites throughout the city. **SPARK** is designed both for total-city-engagement and as a grass-roots initiative aimed at putting low-income Latinos, who make up nearly half of our residents, at the forefront of economic growth. **SPARK** will connect already existing mentoring, training, advising; tutoring; teaching and learning opportunities to those who need them, and also facilitate access to micro-loans and below-market real estate services. **SPARK** is intentionally designed to serve those individuals and organizations in Holyoke who have a "spark" or a desire to move their learning, producing, or combined ambitions toward actualization, but who need or are seeking access to a broad range of community based resources to do so.

**SPARK** is a direct response to a new local economic development strategy based on redefining Holyoke's value-proposition towards innovation and creativity. Holyoke is the new home of the Massachusetts Green High Performance Computing Center (MGHPCC), a supercomputing center that serves MIT, Harvard, UMass, Boston University and Northeastern collectively. The MGHPCC has inspired economic development leaders locally and statewide to recognize Holyoke as a 21<sup>st</sup> century center for innovation. Activity is already underway to build on this investment and leverage continued investments in clean energy, manufacturing, big data, IT, local commuter rail and improved pedestrian and bike infrastructure. The research campus growing around the MGHPCC and the energy it's inspired have given new life to a creative economy in Holyoke's Downtown that is fueling arts, restaurants, cottage industry and retail opportunities. **SPARK** is a key pipeline to developing the active participation of all of Holyoke's current and future residents in this burgeoning innovation and creative economy; **SPARK** is the democratization of the innovation economy.

The central partnerships that have come together to further existing goals and initiatives through the creation of this network represent different strengths in our civic ecosystem: The Greater Holyoke Chamber Centennial Foundation, the lead applicant; the Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council; the Holyoke Public Library; the Juntos Collaborative of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Workforce Development (WD) providers; the City of Holyoke; and the Holyoke Innovation District. The project partners imagine a "spark" to fall within one or any combination of the following categories:

1. Low-income residents, including budding entrepreneurs, community leaders, and other motivated individuals with the desire to change their economic circumstances and/or quality of life.
2. Entrepreneurs—self-identified individuals who need support to make their ideas viable. **SPARK** will be well suited to help those with a social venture business model.
3. Students—K-12, adult learners, and higher education students who are interested in their own ventures and projects.
4. Others interested in living and working/ and/or producing in Holyoke who are seeking local collaboration for their business or project.
5. Community based organizations that have project or social venture ambitions that require a broad based or collaborative environment to address and solve project barriers.

**SPARK** will maximize the digital innovations available to promote more transparent and consistent information and resource sharing. **SPARK** will also rely on and employ trained "**SPARK** Leaders" from within the Latino community to work from the grass roots, identifying individuals and opportunities for the initiative. **SPARK** will operate out of a storefront in Downtown that will be staffed and welcoming to anyone who is seeking participation and will provide access to space and technology at the centrally located new Holyoke Public Library and Learning Center and other locations. **SPARK** will be multi-lingual, will invite youth participation and will facilitate Holyoke's growth as a community across cultures and incomes. **SPARK** is people and organizations both "producing and learning" in equal amounts.

Holyoke, from its very beginning, has been a national center for innovation in manufacturing and renewable energy. Over forty years ago, the promise of well-paid industrial and agricultural jobs attracted a community of migrant residents from Puerto Rico. Since then, Holyoke has become home to the largest per-capita settlement of Puerto Ricans in the United States outside the island of Puerto Rico itself, with a population that is almost 50% Latino (with over 90% from Puerto Rico). Unfortunately, the jobs that fueled this migration no longer exist. The resulting poverty rate in the immediate area surrounding the new MGHPCC (at the heart of the district) is 90% at or below federal standards (see attachment #2).

Steeped in both poverty and rich cultural traditions and skills, this unique population profile presents many challenges and opportunities. Challenges include the transient nature of a migrant (vs. immigrant) population; high rates of poverty and unemployment; education, literacy, language, transportation and childcare barriers; and disincentives to engage in the formal economy. Balancing these challenges and fueling resiliency, is a community with deep traditions and skills in the arts, mechanics and agriculture. Holyoke has a robust informal economy and a collection of storefronts and community based organizations that serve the local Puerto Rican community, yet the Mass Latino Chamber estimates that only 9.8% of the formal businesses in Holyoke are Latino owned. The **SPARK** goal is to close that gap by 3-5% over three years and by 20-25% over 10. Holyoke has dynamic business, educational and social service sectors providing a broad spectrum of offerings; yet, despite a highly collaborative cross-sector work culture within the city, there is often limited exchange of information and lack of awareness of complementary resources and efforts. **SPARK** aims to bridge this communication divide.

**SPARK** is perhaps best understood through some of the anecdotes about actual people that were shared in the many meetings we have had to develop this initiative. (All true stories, some of which will be included in more depth throughout this narrative.) These include:

- A Latina woman calls City Hall looking for resources to open her own baking business but is referred to adult basic education classes. (Through **SPARK** she could have accessed a number of resources including a community kitchen, potential mentors, and even financing, to start her own business which could potentially fill one of the empty storefronts in Holyoke's downtown.)
- A potential investor in the city can't find out what entrepreneurial activity is currently happening around (the many) maker spaces in Holyoke. (Through **SPARK** he would be able to not only find this information, he would be able to connect directly with those making things happen.)
- A student in a Holyoke Community College's business certificate program is failing the program because she is unable to find transportation and childcare. (Through **SPARK**'s distance learning lab at the Library she would be able to either attend the class or review the archived version while, at the same time, taking advantage of the Library's children's programming.)
- A high school student who is dropping out because she is not interested in her classes and really wants to develop video games. (Through **SPARK** she would be able to participate in the Holyoke Business Education Partnership and find mentors to help her realize her dreams.)
- A migrant worker who seeks out ESOL training in order to find more steady employment, only to learn that he won't be able to enter a class for many months because of a long waiting list. (As part of **SPARK** he could learn about Nuestras Raices' community garden and farmers market initiatives as well as ESOL resources at the Library that he can access until he is admitted into the Juntos Collaborative's ESOL class.)
- A high school dropout, who is a talented mechanic but can't find work. (Through **SPARK** he learns about the YMCA HUBS program and gets a job in a bicycle shop with plans to open his own with a micro loan, also through **SPARK**.)

Because at the heart of this initiative, beyond description and breakdown and demographics, are the people and organizations with the desire—*the spark*—to make positive change happen. Holyoke is ready.