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Merger mania

For more than twenty years, I've been telling anyone who would listen that the Blair County Chamber and the Altoona-Blair County Development Corporation should begin discussions that would ultimately lead to a merger.

As a testament to my incredible influence, the merger bandwagon has remained full of empty seats. A business associate even took the time to point out that if I wasn't the person behind the effort to merge, it would have happened by now. You toss sarcasm, quite often sarcasm comes darting back.

Now merger is upon us. The official announcement was made on May 8th. All media outlets were alerted. This was big news. Two economic development giants with impressive histories were dropping their individual agendas to save Blair County! What could be better?

Evidently a lot. Three days after the announcement, the Altoona Mirror ran a story about the merger. On page eight. So far, that's been the extent of the coverage. For the six months in which representatives from both the Chamber and ABCD were meeting to hammer-out the details of the merger, much attention was paid to keeping the effort under wraps. We needn't have worried.

Indifference aside, the process of creating one organization out of two is moving along with a few anticipated hiccups. Most are what you'd expect, especially in combining staff, benefits and technology. We're fortunate to have been working in the same building – side-by-side – for the past twenty years. There are no assigned parking spaces and the employee lunchroom has enough amenities to keep "their leftovers" away from "our condiments."

Since ABCD is the landlord of the Devorris Center and the Chamber is the tenant, it's anyone's guess as to how that relationship will change. Those details go on the list of "Lower High Priorities." That list is just above "Higher Low Priorities." Really, the only list that matters is the one called "Deal Killers." It's the one at the top.

Everything I know about mergers, which isn't very much, leads me to believe that this one will be successful because it's being done for the right reasons. Each organization brings some great things to the table. Those things, from the very start, will be good for the local business community. Will it make sense financially? It certainly better. Otherwise, you can read about it in the Altoona Mirror.

Look for it on page eight.

Sheetz Fellows, LBC natural partners

Building a successful business community often happens one person at a time. And sometimes it happens in bunches. Thanks to a variety of great programs aimed at professional development, Blair County has been more than fortunate.

Among the programs that been attractive to those seeking multiple opportunities to not only gain valuable business insight but also benefit from networking are the Chamber's Leadership Blair County and Penn State Altoona's Sheetz Fellows.

In its 29th year, LBC has graduated more than 600 "servant leaders." Sheetz Fellows, according to founder Steve Sheetz, "was started to help prepare students to lead fulfilling lives." That program started in 2012.

While those who have participated in one or the other of those programs eagerly speak to the value of the experience, the number of graduates of both programs increase by two within a few weeks. That's when Sara Herron and Destinee Pfirsching will become LBC grads.

"It's been an incredible

experience," Herron acknowledged. "Throughout the Sheetz Fellows program, I learned the importance of giving back, fellowship and embracing authentic forms of collaboration and communications. It does those things with an entrepreneurial mindset.

"I was encouraged to apply to LBC by alumni Sherri Stayer and Judy Juda. They both explained how the program had a positive impact on them. I was interested in learning more about leadership in the workplace. LBC taught me that and a whole lot more."

Pfirsching had similar experiences.

"The Sheetz Fellows program helped me to gain confidence," she pointed out. "It helped me to learn how to speak in front of audiences and be comfortable in the business world. When that program finished, I really wanted to be part of another program that would expand on what I had already learned. Leadership Blair County was a logical next-best-step."

Steve Sheetz isn't surprised that Herron and Pfirsching came to that con-



Steve Sheetz congratulates Sheetz Fellows Sara Herron (left) and Destinee Pfirsching who will graduate from LBC in June.

clusion. "I love Leadership Blair County," he disclosed. "We encourage our students to connect with the community in as many ways as possible and to be lifelong learners. It's terrific that these young ladies have recognized ways to broaden their professional development options."

Professional Development has become a high priority

of the Blair County Chamber. It starts as early as sixth grade with the Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!), moves into 8th grade career exploration, gives high school sophomores a double-dose with the BASICS Rotary Career Fair and Leadership Blair County Youth, then it's on to Career Shadowing, Pennsylvania Free Enterprise

Week and LBC Adult. "Our current and future workforce is highly dependent on our ability to create opportunities for people to establish themselves," noted Clark Stapelfeld of New Pig Corporation, who serves as the Chamber's Board Chair. "We've had great success, thanks to a business community that understands the benefits."

Leadership runs in the family LBC welcomes new graduates



Among the recent LBC Youth graduates and their LBC parents are, left to right (seated): Mitchell Baronner and mother Maureen Letcher and Jeff Muriceak and daughter Claire. (standing): Carlee Ranalli and daughter Anastasia and Stacey Bernhart and son Benjamin.

What do Carlee Ranalli, Jeff Muriceak, Stacey Bernhart and Maureen Letcher have in common? In the Blair County Chamber world, the four are graduates of the Leadership Blair County Adult program. On May 10th, that group of four acquired an additional connection as each had a child graduate from Leadership Blair County Youth.

"We've had this happen several times before but not involving four students out of one class," acknowledged Brittany Mayer, the Chamber's VP of Membership Education and Digital Media. "It's really neat that parents are passing their enthusiasm for LBC on to their children." Not only neat but quite logical, according to Ranalli.

"LBC is truly a special experience that I will never forget," she disclosed. "I told my daughter (Anastasia) if she had the opportunity to participate, it would be one of the best experiences of her high school career."

Muriceak shared similar comments with his daughter (Claire). "I was wholly supportive of her participation but it was actually my wife Joan who encouraged her to apply," he pointed out. "We both felt that she would benefit from the social interaction and the program would assist in building her self-confidence and leadership skills. That's what the program does."

For Bernhart and Letcher, this was, as Yogi Berra would say, déjà vu all over again. Bernhart's daughter

Coby was in LBC Youth in 2015; Letcher's son Maxwell graduated from the program just last year.

"I really believe that my daughter's experience and encouragement prompted my son (Benjamin) to apply, even more than mine did," Bernhart noted. "I never had to initiate a conversation with him about LBC because he always brought it up after each session."

Letcher, who graduated from the adult program in 2017, admitted that she loved learning about opportunities and "hidden treasures" in the community and meeting a wonderful group of people. "I absolutely encouraged (Mitchell) to apply," she stated. "It wasn't a tough sell because Maxwell had enjoyed it the year before."

Scotland and Ireland are dual destinations for one Chamber trip



A medieval castle banquet is just one of the many highlights of this exciting adventure. The tour itinerary also includes stops at Loch Ness, Blarney Castle, Edinburgh Castle and the Cliffs of Moher.

If you're looking for a trip that combines two outstanding destinations, how about Scotland and Ireland?

The Blair County Chamber and Ketur Kurtz Travel will offer a "Taste of Scotland & Ireland" from August 7-16, 2024. The trip includes reserved seats for the spectacular Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Among the other locations on the trip are: Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dublin, Killarney and Bunratty.

"This will be a popular trip because it gives travelers an opportunity to see and experience two great places without having to travel twice," explained Marilyn Templon, the Chamber's Travel Coordinator. "Don't miss it!"

An informational meeting will be held on May 31st at 6:00 p.m. at the Devorris Center for Business Development. No cost or obligation to attend. Register at (814) 943-8151.

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