

## GUEST COLUMN

### Libraries are vital resources

There have been many discussions about how different entities have responded to the changing environment due to the pandemic, and I am extremely pleased with the way the eight libraries in the Blair County Library System have risen to the challenge. This success can be attributed to every staff person, volunteer and board member, all of whom have an unmatched dedication to community.



**Jennifer Knisely**

Altoona Area Public Library

When thinking about the initial shutdown in March, most of us probably think about a slowing down of things. I can tell you that during this time, your public libraries began to kick things into high gear. We began preparing to offer curbside pickup of materials, virtual programs for children, online tutorials to help people navigate digital resources, extra support for online learners and home educators, and we sought out ways to extend free Wi-Fi services beyond our physical walls and into parking lots and community parks.

The pivot from in-person services to online or virtual services was a quick one and exemplifies the adaptability of our public library system. Our libraries responded in a systematic, responsible way to reopen facilities as quickly as possible, all while continuing to provide services to those that needed our support the most and navigating mandates from the Pennsylvania Departments of Health and Education.

Our most vulnerable populations at the time — the unemployed, families with young children and the isolated elderly population — were able to easily transition to many options for service delivery, with in-person services being offered again beginning in early June at some of our locations.

Right now, all eight of our Blair County Libraries are open for in-person business while still offering a wide variety of contactless and digital service options as well. Even with the uncertainty of funding due to a bifurcated state budget process and many cancelled fundraisers, our library leaders made it a priority to continue on with a steady pace of strategic re-opening and re-evaluation of service models.

Currently, there are 90,306 registered card holders in the Blair County Library System. If you are not one of them, you are missing out, and I encourage you to contact your local library to get a card. You will be amazed at what a public library in 2020 can offer you and your family!

## Penn Highlands lands a perfect fit for Nunez

*As the new president of Penn Highlands Community College (since January 6<sup>th</sup>), Steve Nunez mixes a strong academic background with high energy as he endeavors to show people throughout the region the many benefits of a community college education. The 50-year-old Nunez was a biology professor before moving into administration.*

**The Chamber: What factors attracted you to Penn Highlands and what do you see as the opportunities there?**

**Steve:** I was very careful on what opportunities I applied for when I was searching for a presidency. The criteria were: rural, small enrollment, a faculty and staff who understood the community college mission, and a Board of Trustees who were engaged and would be supportive to me as their new president.

**The Chamber: Why haven't community colleges gained similar popularity in Pennsylvania to those in many other states?**

**Steve:** In many states community colleges have much

### Chamber Q&A

more defined missions and spheres of influence — as determined by the state government. Because of that my thought is that there are many, sometimes competing, organizations that are filling the workforce development and higher education need for local communities in PA. Therefore, it is imperative that we all work together and partner to best serve our students and communities.

**The Chamber: What would people in Blair County be surprised to know about Penn Highlands?**

**Steve:** That Penn Highlands is accredited by Middle States Commission for Higher Education, the same accrediting body as Penn State. We must meet the same criteria for accreditation as any other university of the state which helps us maintain the high quality education we offer to our students.

**The Chamber: Who are your personal and profes-**



Steve Nunez, Penn Highlands Community College president, credits his parents for providing the foundation that has helped set his educational career path. Nunez became the college's president early this year.

**sional role models and why?**

**Steve :** Personally, my parents provided the foundation for who I am today. While they are my parents, they were also my mentors. They instilled in me to treat people with kindness and respect and to listen to diverse viewpoints. Profes-

sionally, I have so many people who have supported, engaged, and pushed me to be a better professional and leader that it is hard to narrow it down to just a few people.

**The Chamber: What's on Steve Nunez's "bucket list?"**

**Steve:** Being named Presi-

dent at Penn Highlands certainly was on my bucket list. I'm thrilled to be here and feel very lucky to have the opportunity. But if you are looking for some fun bucket list items I would say to cycle 100 miles in one day and to learn to play the guitar.

## Altoona City Councilmen assist Chamber in an effort to recruit municipal candidates

Candidates for elected office in Blair County municipalities are becoming hard to come-by. The Blair County Chamber's Public Policy Committee would like to help change that.

The committee has been meeting with elected officials to compile information on ways to encourage more

"Local governance is extremely important," explained Greg White, who chairs the committee. "We have municipalities that are considering reductions in the number of elected officials because people are unwilling to run. That's a problem."

Bellwood Borough is one

of those, announcing that it intends to reduce its council seats from seven to five. It may start a trend, White believes.

"Our committee would sooner help municipalities find candidates rather than have them reduce the representation necessary to be effective," he pointed out.

One target of recruitment efforts is likely to be another of the Chamber's committees — Young Professionals of Blair County. That committee has already had preliminary discussions with Public Policy and has been visited by two young professionals — Jessie Ickes and Joe Carper — who are recently-elected Altoona City Councilmen.

The two also spoke to the Public Policy Committee at its October meeting.

"Jesse and Joe are classic examples of the type of young people (they are both 26) who bring energy and enthusiasm to local government," White acknowledged. "Their willingness to speak to potential candidates of all ages is really impressive. They understand how the political process works and they can relate to the type of concerns that keep some people from being willing to throw their hats in the ring."

High on that list of concerns, at least from the standpoint of young professionals, is the fact that



Joe Carper (left) and Jesse Ickes spoke to the Chamber's Public Policy Committee.

many are transitioning to roles as newlyweds, parents and homeowners. "It's a busy time to make

additional commitments," White noted. "We're hoping to find people who can balance multiple priorities."

## Leadership Blair County retreat builds spirit of cohesion among class members

The 26<sup>th</sup> class of the Chamber's Leadership Blair County program began its yearlong journey toward becoming servant leaders with a two-day retreat, October 1-2, at the Blair County Convention Center. The class consists of sixteen members from a wide range of industry sectors.

"If the past two days are any indication, this class will really be successful in making the most of this experience," explained the Chamber's Judy Juda, who coordinated the retreat. "They came together as a group really quickly and already have an obvious appreciation for the county."

The retreat itself fosters that spirit of cohesion, according to class member Eammon Clark of Sheetz.

"It's well structured, "he pointed out. "It features a number of creative ways to bring people together who don't know one another. It's also a great way of acclimating people to the community."

Katie Whysong of CNB Bank agreed.

"It was so much fun getting to know everybody on a personal level," she disclosed. "So many of the sessions emphasized the importance of putting aside your personal agendas and looking for ways to help others accomplish their goals."

Leadership Blair County is accepting applications for the 2022 class. An application as well as information about the program is on the Chamber Website at [www.blairchamber.com](http://www.blairchamber.com).



Among the team-building exercises that were part of the Leadership Blair County Adult Retreat was one in which teams of four put together bicycles with some team members blindfolded and others unable to speak.



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