

GUEST COLUMN

When will travel return to normal?

Within the travel community, the most pressing question continues, “when will travel return to normal?” Having participated in countless Zoom conferences with numerous trade associations, having consulted individually with industry experts, and within my own research, the consensus has been that travel has evolved into a revised normal for now.

Travel overall continues to be extremely unpredictable and continues to rotate within an ebb and tide effect as compared to having turned the “on switch.”

Mark Ickes

Explore Altoona

The ongoing public health crisis turned into an economic debacle both continue to be extremely fluid. The negative impact of this economic aftermath on the global travel industry will be at least ten times that of September 11th. And the largest challenge continues to be improving the consumer’s confidence levels to travel. Visitor sentiment surveys have exhibited a low of 25% of respondents confident to travel mid-April; 45% mid-July; and 50% mid-September. Sentiments will be influenced on containment of the coronavirus, treatments, and vaccine.

According to Tourism Economics, the US travel industry will see a GDP loss of \$1.2 trillion in 2020. The state of PA has seen a 60% decline in travel spending between March 1 and September 30, making it the sixth most adversely impacted out of all 50 states. Projections for returns to 2019 levels among select sectors include: air travel by 2024; hotel occupancy by 2023-2024; business travel 50% by the end of 2021; and travel spending overall by 2023 or later.

Recognizing these alarming outlooks, each market will have its own region-specific long-term recovery path. For those confident to travel, they have searched for destinations not known for having large crowds and for those having abundant outdoor spaces and recreation. Most travel has been within travelers’ own states and within a two hour drive radius.

Therefore, Blair County may be positioned to rebound more favorably within a shorter time period than larger areas. This has been the case throughout the second half of 2020. According to Smith Travel Research, Altoona’s hotels continue to outperform seven comparative PA markets in percentage comparisons to last year across five quantitative measures.

Recognizing these positive attributes, yet realistically understanding that a complete recovery will not transpire overnight, it is foreseeable that Blair County will continue to benefit from its reputation for resiliency and diversity within its tourism business community.

Mill Hill optimistic about agriculture

As Farm-City Month winds-down, the agricultural community in Blair County has had a chance to assess the impact that Covid-19 has had on the county’s largest industry sector. One longtime area agribusiness has already determined that even a pandemic can have upsides.

“We see opportunities everywhere,” acknowledged Jim Biddle, the President of Mill Hill Farm Supply of Williamsburg. “We believe in education and would like to insure that our youth understand the importance of agriculture. As far as our store itself, we’re looking at resetting what we offer to reflect our emphasis on healthy choices.”

A family-owned business, Mill Hill traces its roots back to 1980 when Jim and his wife Carol purchased the local Eastern States dealership. The couple built a retail sales building across from the Biddle Family Farm. In 1987, they purchased Keystone Feed and Flour Mill and moved the operation to the current

location. The business has nine employees.

Mill Hill Farm Supply has been one of the area’s top suppliers of basic feed, hardware, pet, wild bird and lawn and garden needs. Its full service feed mill grinds and mixes feeds for many types of animals in addition to offering grain cleaning and storage.

“As farmers and pet owners and gardeners ourselves, we’re able to recommend the tried and true methods of farming while still keeping up-to-date on new products and industry trends,” Jim admitted. “We’re also an outlet for Pennsylvania hunting and fishing licenses and Blair County dog licenses.”

Adjusting to the trends has been both challenging and satisfying, according to Jim and Carol’s daughter Sarrah, who serves as Mill Hill’s Location Manager. Sarrah is one of the ninth generation of family members to work on the Biddle Farm. The Biddle’s continue to operate the dairy farm in addition to Mill Hill.



The Mill Hill Farm Supply Management Team consists of (left to right): Sarrah Lyons - Location Manager, Carol Biddle - Secretary/Treasurer and Jim Biddle - President.

“We’ve noticed that more people are interested in growing their own food,” Sarrah pointed out. “We have seen the sale of garden seeds skyrocket as well as a strong increase in families raising flocks of chicken, pigs or beef animals. A lot of people are new to growing

their own food and we’re excited to help them learn.”

As an animal nutritionist Sarrah has a wealth of experience in key areas of agriculture. She has some creative ideas for Mill Hill’s future.

“I think it would be neat to offer lunch and snacks,”

she noted. “We’re working on ways to have dairy foods available in our store. We hope to also introduce new products that can be utilized by our community. There’s plenty of good things ahead.” (Mill Hill Farm Supply has been a Chamber Member since 1999.)

Cracker Barrel Old Country Store combines best of eating, shopping



Kristy Lightner, General Manager of the Cracker Barrel Old Country Store in Altoona, has helped to keep the business operating efficiently during Covid-19, despite having a diminished workforce.

Has it really been eighteen years since Cracker Barrel Old Country Store opened in Altoona? Hard to believe, even for Kristy Lightner, who has been general manager at the location for more than five years.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” she admitted. “We’ve had such great support from so many people in this community. They seem to appreciate what we do. The number of repeat customers is very encouraging to a business like ours that’s in a competitive market.”

The Cracker Barrel brand has been largely responsible for the popularity that the business has enjoyed, according to Lightner.

“Our brand strives to provide a home away from home experience for all our guests,” she explained. “We offer authentic, homemade country-style cooking in an atmosphere reminiscent of simpler times.”

Staples like Chicken’n’-



Dumplings continue to be crowd-pleasers. Cracker Barrel knows that because they routinely take the time to ask. That kind of information is invaluable, Lightner believes, and is consistent with the company’s mission of “pleasing people.”

The quality of the food aside, Cracker Barrel doubles-up on customer satisfaction by featuring the additional aspect of the Old Country Store.

“The fact that we’re more than just a restaurant is an added bonus,” Lightner acknowledges. “Some people come here to eat, some come to shop and most come to do both. It’s a concept that’s simple but very effective.”

Like many restaurants,

Cracker Barrel has had to be creative to get through the challenges posed by the pandemic. They have offered curbside pickup, in-house pickup and contactless delivery to bridge the gap during those times that inside dining was not an option. While creativity has been high from the food availability side, one critical issue has made production difficult.

“Our biggest challenge during Covid has been finding enough people to fill our staffing needs,” Lightner reported. “Right now, we have 70 employees. Prior to Covid, I had a team of 130. We’re working hard to fill positions, everything from hosts and servers to dishwashers, day maintenance and cooks. We’ve also got openings from the retail side.”

Still she is hopeful. “We have a great business here. We’re already seeing a resurgence. We look forward to being all the way back.” (Cracker Barrel has been a Chamber Member since 2014.)

Senator to keynote LBC Alumni Breakfast

Senator Judy Ward will be the speaker at the Leadership Blair County Alumni Breakfast, to be held on Friday, October 30th from 7:30 to 9:00 a.m. at The Casino at Lakemont Park. Senator Ward is a graduate of the LBC program.

“We’re honored to have Senator Ward as our speaker,” reported Gary Drenning of National Property Inspections, who chairs the Alumni Committee. “As a graduate of LBC, she personifies the concept of servant leadership that has long been the basis of the program.”

The event will also include the presentation of a check from the LBC Alumni to the AASD Free Little Library. The LBC Alumni had designated the Free Little Library as its annual project to help move an initiative forward.

“This effort helped to make books available to young people in the Altoona



Senator Judy Ward

Area School District,” Drenning explained. “The response from the community was really outstanding and will make a difference to young readers.”

Leadership Blair County is currently in its 27th year. The program also has a youth component involving high school sophomores. LBC Youth is in its 18th year.

Registration for the breakfast is available on the Chamber Website at www.blairchamber.com. Information on the LBC program is also available on that site.

WELCOME TO THE CHAMBER

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1221 Club Terrace Road
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Altoona, PA 16603

Rogers Preservations
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Chamber Job Board

Chamber Members looking to hire can post available positions on the Chamber’s Job Board, located at www.blairchamber.com. There is no cost. Contact Gwen Querry at (814) 943-8151.

