

Chamber takes a hard look at its future

At a time when chambers of commerce across the country are struggling to maintain relevance to their members, the Blair County Chamber has continued to grow and has received frequent accolades for its efforts in assisting the business community during Covid-19.

“Those things are nice to hear,” acknowledges Board Chair Darin Tornatore, “but they remind us that this is no time to rest on our laurels.”

To put an exclamation point on that statement, Tornatore, the Chamber Board and the Chamber staff participated in a full-day Strategic Planning session on October 4th, conducted by Kevin Sensenig of Interaction Dynamics Group.

“Kevin did an outstanding job in fleshing-out the issues of current and future importance,” Tornatore disclosed. “We actually discussed strategies that will serve the organization over

the next twenty years.”

The basis for much of the discussion was input from the Chamber membership through a survey conducted in late September.

“The survey results were quite illuminating,” reported board member Alex Seltzer. “Our members were very helpful in pointing out priorities that we hadn’t considered. We’ll be looking for ways to address those issues.”

One of those issues, not surprisingly, is technology. While the Chamber has already “upped-its-game” where technology is concerned, it still has a long way to go, according to board member Amy Mearkle.

“Technology is constantly changing,” she pointed out. “For an organization like the Chamber to keep being successful, it needs to improve the type of technology options that serve the most critical needs of its members.”

To accomplish that, board member Cory Gehret believes that the Chamber will need to hire a staff member exclusively to handle social media.

“So much of what the Chamber does is sometimes minimized because not all members have access to it,” Gehret noted. “With social media playing a huge role in how businesses prefer to keep apprised of valuable information, our focus needs to move us in that direction.”

As most organizations, the Chamber uses its Mission Statement as a guide for deciding on programs and events. That Mission Statement hasn’t changed for more than a quarter-century. The Board may be looking to make a tweak or two to reflect some of the new directions that the Chamber is heading.

“Anytime you take a hard look at what you’re doing, it usually has an impact on



Kevin Sensenig of Interaction Dynamics Group, facilitated a full-day Strategic Planning session on November 4th with Chamber Board members and staff. The Chamber will begin implementation of a new plan in December.

your mission,” admitted board member Becky Crilly. “Even though our current Mission Statement has served us well for a long period of time, there

are some things that deserve consideration. I think our Board will be looking at a number of those.”

The Chamber Board began setting timelines for future

goals at last Thursday’s meeting. The Strategic Planning Report will be made available to all Chamber members within a few weeks.

“Rolling with the punches” new strategy of the historic Knickerbocker Tavern

Terry Reed has never been one to side-step a challenge. When he and his wife Lillan purchased what is now the Knickerbocker Tavern in Altoona in 1995, they knew that it would be an uphill battle.

“When we bought it, the bar on the premises was called the Variety Room,” Reed explained. “It had been owned by John and Isabella Turchetta from the 1950’s to 1990. We had to do a substantial amount of renovations and we gave it a new name that was derived from the Knickerbocker Construction Company which had erected the building in 1904.”

It is the quintessential neighborhood bar – from the exterior. Once inside you are met by a massive spirits collection (700 whiskies and counting!) along with lines of taps for draught beer, wine and cocktails. The restaurant then expands into two back dining rooms as well as a large European-style courtyard.

“At the Knickerbocker, we strive to offer a complete experience – from our knowledgeable service staff, interesting food specials and expansive beer, wine and cocktail lists,” Reed pointed out. “There is something for everyone at the Knickerbocker Tavern.”

One thing that the business was determined not to



Terry Reed has used the challenges thrown at bars and restaurants by Covid-19 to look at ways that his business - Knickerbocker Tavern - can operate more effectively and broaden its business services.



feature, however, was Covid-19. Like all bars and restaurants throughout the country, the Knickerbocker was suddenly forced to close its doors.

“We had to lay off our staff – we employ close to 40 people during the summer months,” Reed pointed out. “That was a difficult day for us because we knew that most of our employees had families of

their own. When we were allowed to re-open, even with restrictions, it was an exciting time.” And one that Reed refused to take for granted, especially when it came to following the mandates and CDC guidelines.

“It’s so important to us that all of our customers feel safe while dining with us and that our staff knows that we are taking their safety seriously as well,” he emphasized. “Although it’s been difficult some evenings when customers attempt to enter our bar without masks, we’ve actually gained new customers because they appreciate our taking the mandates seriously.”

As the pandemic continues to create financial hurdles for businesses like the Knickerbocker, it’s not something that Terry Reed intends to dwell-on. He’s currently looking for creative ways to improve pick-up and delivery services and he’s hoping to purchase multiple heaters to turn his courtyard into a year-round dining area.

“Since the initial shutdown in March, we have just rolled with the punches,” Reed admitted. “That will continue to be our plan until we can get back to normal.”

The Knickerbocker Tavern has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2005.

2021 Chamber Board positions announced



Leslie Estep



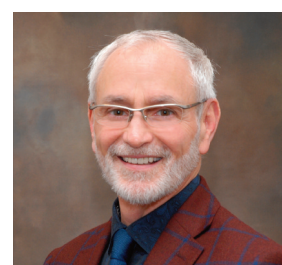
Leonard Fiore, III



Jan Fisher



Cory Gehret



Alex Seltzer



Clark Stapelfeld

The 2021 Blair County Chamber Board of Directors will include seven current members who will be beginning new terms.

Board members who have completed their first 3-year terms and have been approved for a second term are: Jan Fisher of UPMC Altoona, Cory Gehret of Stiffler McGraw, Alex Seltzer of Manpower of Altoona, Clark Stapelfeld of New Pig Corporation and Jamie Stumph of Advantage Resource Group.

Board members who had served 1-year terms and were approved for a 3-year term are: Leslie Estep of Tyrone Area School District and Leonard Fiore III of Fiore Brothers Management.

The Chamber Board consists of twenty-one members. Eighteen of those members serve 3-year terms, the other three are



Jamie Stumph

appointments made by the Board Chair. Those appointments will be made in December when a Board Chair is elected by the Board.

“We appreciate the willingness of the five board members who were completing their first terms to accept additional terms,” explained Chamber Board Chair Darin Tornatore. “We’re also happy that Leslie Estep and Leonard Fiore are remaining with us. They’ve done a great job!”

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