

Chamber Annual Meeting a virtual success

While it didn't quite carry the same interactive appeal of an in-person event, the 2021 version of the Blair County Chamber's Annual Meeting & Awards Presentation last Friday still got high marks for creativity.

"There was some concern when this format was initially suggested a couple months ago that we were overreaching," acknowledged board member Darin Tornatore, who helped coordinate the effort. "It was clearly a challenge, in terms of technology and logistics. But we've got some really creative people in the organization who weren't intimidated by what might happen. Those people won the day."

One of those who stepped-up in a big way was James Gerraughty, Government Procurement Program Manager at Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission.

"James listened to what we wanted to do and agreed to make it happen," Tornatore pointed out. "He coordinated everything from start to finish."

The Annual Meeting was kicked-off by a welcome from Amy Mearkle of DelGrosso Family of Companies, a member of the Chamber Board of Directors who served as MC. As outgoing board chair, Tornatore then provided an overview of the many Chamber programs and events that did and did not happen during 2020. He then passed the gavel to new chair Richard Fiore, Jr. who will

serve in that role for the next two years.

"Darin did an incredible job under some daunting circumstances," Fiore admitted. "His will be a tough act to follow."

Despite the virtual format, the Chamber was still able to preserve the tradition of surprising the award winners. The winners were invited to the Chamber Office, located in the Devorris Center for Business Development, under false pretenses.

"Each one thought they were there for a different purpose," explained Chamber VP Gwen Querry, who has staff responsibility of overseeing the Annual Meeting. "A couple thought they were there to attend a committee meeting, a couple others were asked to congratulate people who they were told were receiving awards. All were surprised."

The surprises consisted of horns, balloons and devious friends. And, of course, video equipment that caught the moment to be shown at the Annual Meeting itself.

This award presentation began with retired Chamber VP Judy Juda receiving the coveted Athena Award for her many years of helping to promote the role of women in business.

"It was a little ironic that the person who spent so many years tricking people into attending the Annual Meeting to receive an award finally got a taste of her own medicine," Tornatore kidded. "Her selection was justified and long overdue."

The Judith A. Rossi Educator of the Year Award went to Lindsay Bumbarger, a teacher at Baker Elementary School in Altoona. Virginia Helsel of Hollidaysburg won the George Award for her volunteer work in helping people deal with situations of poverty. Debbie Eckenrode of Farmers Insurance was the recipient of the Joseph P. Rosenhamer Chamber Spirit Award for her work as a Chamber Ambassador and for helping in the recruitment and retention efforts of Chamber members.

The Donna D. Gority Servant Leadership Award went to Derek Martin, the General Manager of the Altoona Curve, who initiated or supported a number of events to help people through the trials and tribulations of Covid-19. Matthew Fownes, owner of three local Dairy Queens, was chosen Small Business Person of the Year for his ability to keep his businesses viable while dealing with periodic shutdowns and governmental mandates. And Chelsea Kerr Veneskey was named Young Professional of the Year for her involvement in local organizations and for helping to promote business in Downtown Altoona.

Among the award sponsors of the Annual Meeting were: First Commonwealth Bank, DelGrosso Family of Companies, Allegheny Lutheran Social Ministries, P. Joseph Lehman, Inc., Consulting Engineers, Reliance Bank, First National Bank and ABCD Corporation.



At top: As Darin Tornatore (left) figuratively passes the gavel to incoming Chamber Board Chair, Richard Fiore, Jr., it is actually Fiore that presents a ceremonial gavel to Tornatore for his two years of service in that role.

Chamber Board Member Amy Mearkle donated her time and talent as the host for this year's virtual Annual Meeting of the Blair County Chamber of Commerce.

Persistent effort pays off for Veeder-Root; Company earns Sustainability recognition

When the Sustainable Blair County Committee of the Blair County Chamber compiled a survey to help businesses assess how effectively they deal with environmental issues, the committee attached incentives to allow for bragging rights. Depending on how many of the survey standards were met would determine whether a business would be rated in either the bronze, silver or gold category.

"We borrowed the idea from Sustainable Pittsburgh," explained Committee Chair Chris Foster of Stiffler McGraw. "We modified their survey to more closely fit our business community. It's really a great way to measure some very important aspects of a successful company."

Initially, six businesses and one school completed the survey. When the scores were compiled, all but one landed in the bronze category. That one was Veeder-Root.

"We got a participation award," remembered Stefan Long, the company's EHS Specialist & Sustainability Lead. "It let us know that we still had some work to do."

They began to look at areas of the survey that needed addressed.



Chamber President Joe Hurd (left) presents a Silver Level Certificate to Stefan Long of Veeder-Root. Looking-on is Veeder-Root's Environmental Health & Safety Manager, Matt Holsberger.

"It came at a good time because we were also making some upgrades to our plant that corresponded with areas of weakness," Long pointed out. "We had a real commitment from our company and our Sustainability Committee to move things forward."

It took a full year but according to Long it was time and resources well spent.

"We made the decision early-on that we weren't aspiring to get to the bronze category. We wanted to go straight to silver since no one had gotten there yet.

We felt the need to show people in Blair County how seriously we view sustainability at Veeder-Root. We're proud to have reached that mark. The goal is now to get to gold."

Foster is happy to hear that. As committee chair, he's helping to put together a promotional effort to get more businesses to recognize the advantages of looking closely at the factors that many ignore.

"The people on our committee understand that businesses have a lot of things to deal with, especially with

the challenges of the pandemic," he acknowledged. "But sustainability covers a lot of essential practices that insure safety and also save money. Does this survey require a certain amount of time to complete? Yes, especially if you are thorough. As the businesses that have already completed it will tell you, it's time well-spent."

The survey is available on the Chamber Website at www.blairchamber.com. For information on Sustainable Blair County, contact Joe Hurd at jhurd@blairchamber.com.

New officers at the helm of Chamber Foundation



James Gerraughty



Rachel Prosser

The Blair County Chamber Foundation, the 501(c)(3) arm of the Blair County Chamber announced new officers for 2021. James Gerraughty of Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission is the new president of the Foundation, succeeding Brian Irwin of Irwin Financial whose term expired in December. Rachel Prosser of Altoona-Blair County Development Corporation is vice-president and Cindy Cessna of the Blair County Chamber continues as secretary-treasurer.

Gerraughty begins his fifth year on the Foundation Board. He and Prosser are both graduates of the Leadership Blair County program. His goals include continuing the efforts that Foundation has undertaken to fund the various Chamber programs that deal with young people.

"We're always looking for new funding streams," Gerraughty pointed out. "The BASICS programs that we



Cindy Cessna

currently fund have needs that grow exponentially. Our future workforce is a high priority for the Chamber and we do whatever we can to connect that priority to those within the business community willing to support it."

Gerraughty would also like to "dust-off our by-laws" and do more marketing efforts aimed at raising the Foundation's profile.

"Generally, I don't think most people have a good idea of what we do," he disclosed. "That's an ongoing battle. We provide funding and guidance and have had an impact in a lot of important ways. We need to tell our story more often."

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