



## Avoidable consequences

With all the questions that still need to be answered about Blair County's ability to get off the deck after being sucker-punched by a pandemic, one question may prove particularly bothersome:

"Will our economy withstand our reluctance to play by the rules?"

It was no accident that two of the industry sectors that

have been featured in recent issues of the Business Insight have been hotels and attractions. We also do a monthly feature on restaurants entitled "Fork & Spoon." Toss in a smattering of retail stories from time-to-time and all the bases are covered. The common denominator is, of course, travel and tourism.

Talk to Mark Ickes at Explore Altoona and he'll tell you to the penny how much travel and tourism contributes to our county economy. It's millions. Without those dollars, we'd be a wasteland. It's a problem we've never had to worry about.

What changed? The past thirteen months have created a situation that has inflicted far more psychological damage than financial hardship. From the dig-in-our-heels reluctance to follow the dictates of our governor to the apparent lack of trust associated with the "warp-speed" development of a vaccine, we are sitting uncomfortably between that proverbial rock and hard place.

To many people, it's simply a matter of individual freedom. "If I don't want to wear a mask or get the vaccine, that's my prerogative. I know the risks and if I choose to take those risks, it's no one's business but my own!" It's that last part that makes retail and hospitality businesses nervous.

In the Covid-19 world, Blair County has gained a reputation. In fact, we've gained a couple of them. Our initial reputation was that we were one of the counties being initially mistreated with mandates despite the fact that we had minimal documented cases. Over time, as testing became more prevalent, our numbers climbed. By then, the compliance message rang hollow. Our new reputation is that we are a county that has little regard for safety measures. On top of that, our vaccine statistics are among the Commonwealth's lowest. Herd immunity doesn't appear to be on the horizon.

About those travel and tourism concerns? Will anyone be in a hurry to visit an area that carries the perception of health concerns? That's an issue that needs addressed now. Before it's too late.

(Joe Hurd is President/CEO of the Blair County Chamber)

## Lee Hite remains a community leader

Lee Hite has never placed a timeline on serving the leadership needs of his community. The 76-year-old Altoona businessman spent 51-years at The Hite Company, selling the business to Mayer Electric Supply in 2018. In his current role, which he describes as "company cheerleader," Lee keeps contact with branch associate staff and key customers to promote the company culture. He remains one of the area's most generous philanthropists. Lee and his wife Janie have three daughters and ten grandchildren.

**The Chamber: Of all the incredible things that you've been able to accomplish as a business leader, of what are you most proud?**

**Lee:** A proud personal accomplishment is that along with a number of loyal and dedicated employees we were able to build a small family-owned business started by my parents in 1949 into a 3 state, 25 location electrical distributor.

**The Chamber: The acquisition by Mayer Electric Supply of The Hite Company is three years old. Has it accomplished what you hoped it would?**

**Lee:** The simple answer is YES! The long answer certainly is more detailed and was focused on these 4 main goals: **Continuity of employment to benefit**

## Chamber Q&A

**Hite associates and their families** – The Hite Company took tremendous pride in being a family-owned business with a focus on employee satisfaction, retention, and tenure. Mayer has the same culture and philosophies. **Access to IT systems for continued growth** – Mayer's IT resources and offerings are more advanced than what The Hite Company had and likely would ever have provided due to the high cost of investment. **Customer retention** – Our customers were beginning to stretch our capabilities outside of The Hite Company's ability to service areas. **Shareholder transition** – The Hite Company ownership had 4 family shareholders. My son-in-law, Scott Lawhead, was the only other family member actively involved in leadership. I approached a time in my life when I wanted to guarantee continuity and employment security, so making a good choice was going to be an issue.

**The Chamber: What would most people in Blair County be surprised to know about The Hite Company?**

**Lee:** People in Blair County might be surprised



Lee Hite has maintained his love for the local business community by constructing a railroad-themed display at the Hite Company office in Altoona.

to know that The Hite Company originally was named Penn Central Company when we started business in 1949. Blair County historically has been an important railroad hub. At one point when there was a merger of The Pennsylvania Railroad Company (PRR) and New York Central Railroad, they chose the name Penn Central. To avoid confusion between the obviously bigger railroad company and us, my father sold the rights of our Penn Central Company name. As a person who always was community focused, Bob Hite negotiated that half of the payment would be directed to various

local projects/charities/initiatives.

**The Chamber: Who are your personal and professional role models and why are they special?**

**Lee:** I was very lucky to have the personal role models of my much admired parents. Evie and Bob Hite both were fun-loving people whose lives centered on strong work ethics, firm principles, and valuing family, friends, and community. One professional role model for me would be Jack Nicklaus. Jack is talented at the game and also a great family man. One of his famous quotes that is a particular

inspiration is, "A legacy is not what you do on the field or in the ropes; a legacy is what you leave behind for others and how you are remembered."

**The Chamber: What's still on Lee Hite's "bucket list"?**

**Lee:** My bucket list involves staying involved in community work and continuing to serve on various boards/committees that strive to make a positive difference for the future. I enjoy supporting the 'entrepreneurial spirit of young people and community members.' Helping people to initiate their new ideas is a benefit to us all!

## Blair County attractions eager to return to pre-Covid activities

Travel and tourism in Pennsylvania took a big hit during 2020 as result of Covid-19. That hit resonated particularly hard in Blair County and local attractions bore the brunt of mandates that made it almost impossible to operate.

"It was a time our attractions hadn't seen before and hope never to see again," acknowledged Mark Ickes, Executive Director of Explore Altoona, which partners with the Blair County Chamber on an Attractions Roundtable. "Travel and tourism, so essential to the economy of the region, was at a veritable standstill."

Without people coming to visit – or even being allowed to – it made little sense to provide anything resembling entertainment. The first two businesses to be impacted were the Altoona Curve and DelGrosso's Amusement Park.

"The decision to shutdown Minor League Baseball was made early," admitted General Manager Derek Martin. "There really wasn't anything for us to decide. We went into compliance mode pretty quickly and set a plan for survival. We're still operating within that plan."

While the Curve had the decision made for them, DelGrosso's pulled-the-plug on their own.

"It was an agonizing time," Director of Marketing and Advertising Amy Mearkle remembers. "We recognize the impact that our park has on



Carl Crider, President of DelGrosso's Amusement Park and Laguna Splash is "back in the saddle" again.

travel and tourism but we also knew the restrictions and the lengths we would need to go to accommodate them. In the end, we just couldn't justify it."

In hindsight, Mearkle believes it was the right call. "Most of the parks that did open, waited until July 4th. We normally close in August. It made no sense." DelGrosso's Amusement Park opens this Memorial Day Weekend.

Lakemont Park, faced with the same obstacles, decided to give-it-a-go. The park had an agreement with Central Blair Recreation Commission to host its summer basketball leagues. So with people coming into the park, the staff planned some creative outdoor activities that gave people the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors.

"It turned out to have a pretty good upside," explained Director Melanie Shildt. "This year we've al-

ready been partially open for several weeks. Everything else opens May 8th. We have four proms scheduled in May. We're doing our best to think outside-the-box."

So is Fort Roberdeau. Executive Director Glenn Nelson looks forward to the Fort's May 1st opening.

"We're hoping to build on some momentum," Nelson pointed out. "We've got some school tours already scheduled. Last year our attendance was actually better than usual."

Where travel and tourism is concerned, an important barometer is the Altoona-Blair County Airport. Manager Tracy Plessinger reports positive news.

"We had our best March ever," he noted. "We were up 204%. Most of that has been leisure travel. We just need to get business travel headed in the right direction."

### SETTING THE PACE

## Superman Berrow Workplace Wellness

**1. Title and place of work:** Owner/Founder of B4 Club Therapy.

(Better.Bodies.By.Berrow)

**2. Years with current position?** July 1st will be 3 years.

**3. Positions held in the Chamber:** Vice-chair of the Workplace Wellness Committee.

**4. Family:** Wife - Nicole Berrow.

**5. Community organizations:** Member of Center City Church/Blessings.

**6. Hobbies/leisure:** Traveling, attending live sporting events, reading and hiking.

**7. Education:** B.S. Kinesiology of Exercise Science at the University of Kentucky; M.S. Athletic Training at Shenandoah University.

**8. First job:** Delivery driver at Pizza Hut in Elizabethtown, KY where I grew up.

**9. I would like to be known for:** Being the GOLD STANDARD of providing functional mobility, injury prevention and muscle recovery to the Blair County community as well as the entire state of Pennsylvania.

**10. Business role model:** Mark Kaufman, CEO of Athletico Physical Therapy of Oakbrook, Illinois and former boss for showing me the sacrifice and hard work it takes to build a brand. Also, locally here in Blair County Jim Kilmartin of Center City Church and



Superman Berrow

CEO of Pinnacle Cleaning for showing me how I am an asset here in this community and teaching me I have a platform here that allows me to give back.

**11. Your thoughts about the Chamber:** The Blair County Chamber is a great way to connect and network with other businesses around the area. I love their programs on how to grow in this community and how they market your business when there is great things being done so everyone can acknowledge that.

**12. Your thoughts about Blair County:** I believe Blair County is a tight knit community and when someone believes in you and your company word spreads fast. The love and support I got during the shutdown from the pandemic and the continued and growing support making it out of the pandemic really shows that people care about what we bring and contribute to the area.



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