



New paths to progress

“No, it’s not a merger.” Is it too late to get that tattooed on my forehead? The Alliance announced last week by the Blair County Chamber and the Chamber of Business & Industry of Centre County is the first step toward a regional effort that may ultimately involve chambers from five other counties.

The rallying point will be workforce development. If projections are accurate, Central Pennsylvania will experience a workforce shortage as soon as 2025 that will bring the economy to its knees. And those projections originated prior to the pandemic.

Chambers of commerce in our region have been aware of the situation for quite some time. Our members have helped us undertake initiatives within our individual counties that promote career exploration, identify high priority occupations and support entrepreneurship. The consensus has been that while countywide programs are usually easy to manage, they have certain geographic limitations that make it difficult to offer appealing options to the younger sector of the workforce.

Multi-county attempts to craft regional ventures essentially failed. Too many people at the table. Too many good ideas. Too few ways to get our collective arms around everything.

Creating The Alliance, at least in theory, reduces the shotgun approach to information gathering and allows for a workable path to consensus once all the players are in place. As a region our counties have many of the same obstacles to overcome. We recognize the incredible importance of keeping our current workforce well-trained and our future workforce aware of potential landing spots for family sustaining careers.

As the two largest chambers in the region, the Blair County Chamber and the CBICC have already tested the collaborative waters, creating a trade show in 2018 that will run in November after cancelling in 2020.

The specifics of The Alliance will be hammered-out at meetings to begin in July. There is considerable enthusiasm from both chamber boards and a willingness to commit talents and resources, essential to success.

Central Pennsylvania, as we already know, is a great place to live. It has also been a great place to work. The Alliance is the first major step to keeping it that way.

Innovation leads to new opportunities

A \$36 million project that will create new levels of sustainability, not only for Blair County but throughout the region, is underway at the Altoona Wastewater Treatment Facility. The facility is operated by the Altoona Water Authority and is designed as a regional resource that will process wastes from commercial generators as well as from other wastewater utilities.

“We were concerned about the long-term financial and regulatory risks associated with land application of their biosolids,” explained Todd Musser, Director of Wastewater Operations for the Altoona Water Authority. “The new facility will provide AWA and its rate payers (residential and commercial) with a financially and environmentally sustainable sludge management alternative by recovering the energy inherent in wastewater sludge to reduce its volume, improve its quality and stabilize disposal costs for the next twenty years.”

The new facility will consist of an anaerobic digestion complex that processes wastewater sludge and commercial organic wastes to produce a renewable energy

source (methane gas) which in turn will be recovered and used as the heat source to dry the digested biosolids. The drying process will reduce biosolids volume to 70% and convert the residual solids into a valuable, nutrient-rich fertilizer product.

“The need for reliable and cost-effective biosolids disposal is becoming critical, not only for Altoona but for municipalities throughout the state,” explained Mark Perry, General Manager of Altoona Water Authority. “Over 22 million tons of municipal biosolids are generated annually in Pennsylvania. At the same time, more than 1.2 million tons of food waste is generated annually by Pennsylvania residents, businesses and industries that is almost entirely disposed in sanitary landfills.”

Musser believes that the food industry will be heavily impacted by the new AWA facility.

“Food production and processing facilities as well as other organic waste haulers and recyclers will have a new reliable, low cost and sustainable waste disposal solution,” he pointed out. “All commercial/industrial businesses within the AWA service territory will benefit



Todd Musser (left) and Mark Perry of Altoona Water Authority pose at the retro-fitted process control pump which precipitates the transfer of high-strength organic waste.

from future rate stability afforded by this new resilient, sustainable sludge management infrastructure.”

While the environmental advantages were high priorities in the planning of this project, the financial piece of the puzzle was equally important. Altoona Water Authority has had land-applied Class B biosolids since 1993. The cost to de-water, store, test, transport and land-apply them has rapidly escalated in

recent years. This project creates Class A Exceptional Value Waste.

Among the other improvement project benefits is that it will provide long-term budget stability.

“Our design partner, ESG, is providing a 20-year guarantee that annual tipping fee revenues from commercial organic waste haulers will cover the debt service of the project,” Musser admitted. “That’s very significant.”

The project is currently two months ahead of schedule, according to Musser.

“I’m extremely proud of what we’re doing here,” he noted. “We’re providing valuable services to the people who have some connection to it. There is never an end to this project. It guarantees long-term sustainability.”

(Altoona Water Authority has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2001.)

Client safety continues to be top priority within Securitas culture

It’s a gross understatement to say that security has become a growing priority of the business community. Each day, businesses face challenges to safety and security that were unheard of, even a decade ago.

In Blair County, there are several security firms that offer varying levels of service. One of those with an international reputation is Securitas Security Services USA, located in Altoona’s Ivyside Plaza.

Securitas is a security services company based in Stockholm, Sweden. It employs more than 300,000 in 53 countries worldwide. The Altoona office employs more than 40 fulltime and part-time officers and has been in operation since acquiring Pinkerton in 1999.

“When Securitas first entered the U.S. market by acquiring Pinkerton, we were already the leading protective service company in Europe,” explained Adam Guerin, Field Service Manager for the Altoona Branch. “Few here in America were aware of the firm’s stature in the industry or the respect associated with our name.”

Securitas is now the most locally focused security company in the United States, with 500 district managers and 90,000 security officers providing security solutions to meet the needs of thousands of businesses.

“Our main service offerings are on-site, mobile and remote guarding combined with security sys-



Adam Guerin (left), Field Service Manager for Securitas discusses schedules with scheduler David Hinsch.

tems and corporate risk management,” Guerin pointed out. “With the ability to have mobile officers dispatched to check on local businesses to act as a deterrent, clients have seen immediate value with Securitas performing these services.”

Like most businesses, those that provide security services are experiencing a host of changes. Not surprisingly, many of those involve technology.

“Technology has changed and continues to change drastically not only how we do things but also what we’re able to offer to our clients,” Guerin reported. “When I first started with the company, reports were all done with pen and paper and turned into management every other day or so. Today reports are done electronically as events are happening and are submitted immediately. We’re able to offer our clients more

with remote guarding and real-time response.”

Guerin admitted that his company’s most significant challenge, at least during recent times, was Covid-19.

“The pandemic has affected business in multiple ways,” he noted. “At the start of everything, some businesses decided to shut down or slow down their operations. For some clients, this resulted in a higher need for security while for others this meant that their need for security was eliminated altogether.”

“It also had an effect on retaining or adding talent to our security team, with some employees deciding to stay home throughout the pandemic and new applicants coming in at a slower than usual rate. We’ve had to make adjustments to our recruiting effort.”

(Securitas Security Services USA has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2009.)

Summer help steps-up to give Chamber boost



Dominic Frucella



Mitchell Longstreth

In some industry sectors, summertime is a time of rest and regrouping.

The Blair County Chamber is not one of those industry sectors.

“We use the summer to catch-up and prepare for our many fall events and programs,” acknowledged Chamber President Joe Hurd. “The pace never slows.”

For that reason, the Chamber is grateful to have an extra body or two to help lighten the load. This summer, that help is coming from Dominic Frucella and Mitchell Longstreth. Neither are strangers to the Chamber.

Frucella, who will be a senior at Penn State Altoona in the fall, interned at the Chamber last summer. His experience with social media and digital marketing resulted in the Chamber hiring him for the summer as interim Digital Media Manager.

“We’ve been interviewing for the permanent position,” remarked Chamber Marketing VP Linda Stotler. “Dominic gives us a viable alternative.

He does a terrific job.”

As does the Chamber’s current summer intern, Mitchell Longstreth, who will be a senior at Liberty University. As a high school student, Longstreth was a graduate of the Chamber’s Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) program.

“Mitchell’s extremely talented,” Stotler pointed out. “He’s very much a perfectionist with outstanding design skills.”

The opportunity to gain first-hand experience has been valuable to both young men.

“For me, the pace has been much faster than it was last summer,” Frucella noted. “I have a lot more responsibilities and a smaller margin for error. I’ve also, for the first time, handled a video presentation.”

“The internship has exceeded my expectations,” Longstreth pointed out. I’ve done some things – like writing scripts for radio – that I’ve never done before. The whole experience has been valuable.”



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