

## Chamber setting strategy to engage retailers

Retail is a significant sector of the Blair County economy. It is also one of the most under-represented sectors in the Blair County Chamber membership. The Chamber would like to see that change.

“So much of our economic success as a county is tied to retail,” acknowledged Chamber President Joe Hurd. “Many years ago the decision was made to intentionally become a retail destination. Many of our transportation priorities were geared to finding new and better ways to get people here.”

The Chamber was an important contributor to the process of helping retailers to put their best feet forward in attracting and serving customers, Hurd explained. In the past decade, however, something has changed.

“Despite our ongoing efforts at encouraging local buying and helping retailers find quality employees, we’ve had difficulty retaining many of them as members,” Hurd pointed out. “It’s been disappointing and in many cases hard to understand.”

Where it isn’t hard to understand is the exodus of national retailers, according to Hurd. “All chambers nationwide seem to be facing the same challenges. Many big box stores have set policies to make it difficult for store managers to retain memberships. We’re fortunate that there are still a few that recognize the importance of what we’re doing and how we’re trying to help.”

One particular area of frustration for Hurd and the Chamber is the Logan Valley Mall.

“At one time, all three anchor stores were Chamber members and were heavily involved in what we were doing,” Hurd noted. “Now, only two mall stores are members.”

One of those – Gardners Candies – is a longtime member. The other – Executive Barberz2 – joined last December. That business is looking forward to enjoying the benefits of Chamber membership.

“We joined the Chamber to network, build business relationships and be more involved in the community,”

admitted owner Reggie Godsdén. “We’ve gotten the opportunity to meet other business owners and attend events to network and gain knowledge. We are happy to be Chamber members and proudly display our power card offer in our salon.”

Godsdén isn’t quite sure why more retail businesses aren’t members.

“There’s so much the Chamber has to offer to help a business grow and prosper,” he disclosed. “We encourage all businesses, large and small, to look at what the Chamber does and what a difference it can make.”

Dan May, general manager of the Logan Valley Mall, has been a strong proponent in making his tenants aware of the Chamber and its many benefits. The Mall has been a member for many years. May believes that the national retailers at his facility spend most of their advertising dollars on national marketing campaigns rather than on local organizations like chambers of commerce. He sees that changing as the makeup of the Mall changes.



One of the two retail businesses located in the Logan Valley Mall that are members of the Chamber is Executive Barberz2 Hair Salon. In the photo are Amanda Sullivan and Reggie Godsdén of Executive Barberz2 with Logan Valley Mall Manager Dan May.

“As the tenant mix at the Mall changes to more local retailers, I think more of those will see and experience the benefits of the Chamber,” May stated. “In the meantime, we’ll continue to promote why Chamber membership is important.”

Hurd is hoping that others in the business community will do as well.

“We’ve created a Membership Committee to look at more effective ways to recruit businesses into the organization that have much to gain by being part of a

collective effort,” he said. “What we do ultimately benefits all businesses located here. Why shouldn’t all businesses be willing to pick up some aspect of the investment associated with making Blair County a great place to work and live?”

## Authenticity serves as main ingredient of success

To many in the hospitality industry, the decision by Tony Pacifico and son Anthony to open a barbecue restaurant in Altoona in 2017 was somewhat of a gamble. Others had made valiant attempts to make a mark within a specialized aspect of food preparation. For one reason or another, success was elusive.

It didn’t come easy for the Pacifico’s either. Despite the fact that Old Carolina Barbecue Company had built an impressive reputation in other parts of the country, it took a while for Blair County to fully embrace the concept.

“For the first few years that we were open, we felt that we were one of the best kept secrets in the area,” Anthony Pacifico acknowledged. “It took some time for people here to understand the difference between our product and what they may have had before.”

So what exactly is that difference?

“Old Carolina’s barbecue is as real as it gets when you’re talking about barbecue,” he explained. “It is 100% authentic. The meats are smoked low and slow for over ten hours overnight and our delicious sides are made from scratch. I think that a lot of people who are not familiar with Old Carolina would be surprised to learn that, even though we are considered a fast-casual restaurant, we do barbecue



Heading the team at Old Carolina Barbecue in Altoona are, left to right: Anthony Pacifico - owner, Fallon Lepore - manager and Tony Pacifico - owner.



in the way that it was meant to be done. No shortcuts!”

While many hospitality businesses experienced considerable challenges during Covid-19, Old Carolina’s business model made it possible for the restaurant to smoothly transition to takeout orders.

“We have very few seats in the restaurant as it is and

we were already doing a majority of our business as takeout,” Pacifico pointed out. “We have a very nice and convenient mobile app that guests can order from so that we were actually set up pretty well.”

As far as customer preferences are concerned, he’s not hesitant to make recommendations.

“You can’t go wrong with a pulled pork sandwich, covered in one of our four delicious barbecue sauces, preferably pig-stand style with fried onion straws piled on top. Our True ‘Cue salads that come with your choice of meat and small hush puppy croutons are extremely popular as well.”

As the Pacifico’s express optimism about what they’ve seen in terms of businesses returning to normal, they also recognize that there will be obstacles along the way.

“While the pandemic fortunately seems to be coming to an end, there are other things to deal with,” Anthony admitted. “Like most restaurants, we’re facing struggles in finding employees, offsetting the rising costs of goods and the shortages in some of our products. Overall though, we feel good at where we are.”

(Old Carolina Barbecue Company of Altoona has been a Chamber member since 2018.)

## ARC is next business to earn bronze status



Matthew Singer (left), of ARC accepts a sustainability award from Chris Foster.

When the Chamber’s Sustainable Blair County Committee issued its initial survey three years ago to help businesses assess their level of sustainability, it wasn’t sure which industry sectors would have the greatest interest.

“We were pretty sure that manufacturing would see the value as well as other sectors that require pretty rigorous compliance,” admitted Chris Foster of Stiffler McGraw, who chairs the committee. “We were hoping that some of the sectors that we hadn’t considered would surprise us.”

One of them has. ARC Federal Credit Union recently completed the survey and scored high enough to achieve a bronze level certification. It’s the first financial institution to step-up.

“It made sense for us for so many reasons,” explained Matthew Singer, a loan officer who helped to oversee the effort. “We’re always looking for ways to lower operating costs to benefit our members and contribute in a positive way to the community. When this opportunity came

along, we viewed it as a great way to see if we were on the right track and to get outside suggestions that could be implemented to help.”

According to Singer, the survey accomplished its goals.

“It brought to light issues that we would never have considered otherwise,” he pointed out. “The process of filling-out the survey made us take a deeper look at how we were operating on a daily basis.”

Singer encourages other businesses to take the survey as well.

“As time passes, every business experiences increases in their operational costs as the price of utilities, materials and workforce continue to rise,” he noted. “This survey can be extremely beneficial not only to keeping overhead down but helping us as a business community improve the environment that we all live and work in.”

To access the Sustainability Survey, visit the Chamber Website at [www.blairchamber.com](http://www.blairchamber.com). (ARC has been a Chamber member since 1985.)

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