



Avoiding the bottom rung

"Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important."

Stephen Covey said that and since more people pay attention to what he says than pay attention to what I say, listening to him obviously makes more sense. I use this Covey quote because it so



Joe Hurd

Blair County Chamber of Commerce

accurately represents what I see when I look at our local business community. Businesses, to put it mildly, have too much to deal with and too few viable strategies to get everything done.

Prioritization, most business people would admit, is a grand idea until you're the one who has to do it. Which brings us to current challenges that many of our Chamber committees are facing in jockeying for position amid a growing number of equally motivated ladder-climbers. It's frustrating to understand the unmistakable value that something like workplace wellness or safety or sustainability bring to a business while facing the reality that more times than not they're failing to make the cut.

"We recognize that we need to put more emphasis on things that we are responsible for, either in terms of regulatory compliance or in maintaining our own corporate standards," one weary CEO admitted. "There's really no consolation knowing that everyone is in the same predicament."

So our committees try their best to create opportunities that address the expectations of our businesses even as they come to grips with overall lack of support and participation. A few weeks ago, our Sustainable Blair County Committee held a workshop to garner suggestions on more effective ways to help businesses implement sustainable practices. And, as a carrot, also save money. Despite an extensive recruitment effort for attendees, the turnout was light. The level of enthusiasm was not.

"It was a small group with a lot of good ideas," reported Chris Foster of Stiffler McGraw, who chairs the committee. "We appreciate that sustainability might not rise to the level of priority that we'd like it to. But we also know that we've helped a number of businesses through our surveys and through some educational programs and we're confident that we'll continue to do that."

Our Safety Committee and our Workplace Wellness Committee and our various roundtable groups share that similar optimism. Who's at the top and who's at the bottom matters little.

Membership Campaign set to launch

The long-anticipated resurgence of the Blair County business community is taking a little longer than expected. That's not a surprise to Blair County Chamber President Joe Hurd.

"We notice it in a variety of ways," Hurd pointed out. "Mostly we've noticed it in the inability of some businesses to regain their footing after two years of looking for ways to survive. Sales are down, staffing levels are weak. All of these would qualify as hefty challenges individually. To face them all at once is devastating."

The Chamber has especially noticed it in its membership numbers which have dipped below 1,000 for the first time in twelve years.

"Despite the fact that we've offered opportunities for businesses to remain members even if they've been unable to pay, we've had many indicate that they needed to regroup and, within time, would rejoin," Hurd explained. "Our Unity Fund, which was created to have businesses that could afford to help provide funding for those struggling, still has money in it. Many of those struggling businesses were too ashamed to accept the help."

The dilemma for the

Chamber is that with fewer members, the organization is unable to operate at the level of production and efficiency that it enjoyed prior to Covid-19.

"We're all familiar with the term 'strength in numbers,'" Hurd disclosed. "To really be a dynamic factor in the fortunes of a business community with more needs than ever before, it's essential that we have a membership base that matches the challenges that are in front of us."

To rebuild that base, the Chamber is launching a major Membership Campaign that will begin on March 28th and conclude on May 31st. The campaign, which will be introduced by the Chamber's Membership Committee, will feature a variety of initiatives that include a recruitment component by the Board of Directors, incentives for current members to help identify and sign-up prospective members and even a percentage discount on dues for those who join.

"The Membership Committee has really been motivated to make this campaign successful," acknowledged Jessie Covert, the Chamber's Vice-President of Sales and Membership Development. "They've got a real sense of the pulse of the



Jessie Covert, VP of Sales and Membership Development at the Chamber, puts together lists of potential members for the upcoming campaign.

business community."

Even with the incredible importance associated with making the campaign a success, the Chamber marketing staff has still seen value to inject a level of fun to the project. The campaign itself has been branded, "Catch'22 Membership Challenge." The slogan centers on the opportunity for Chamber members to earn \$50 in gift cards by recruiting a non-member and taking the recruitment process

to its completion.

"The incentive serves a number of purposes," Covert admitted. "It brings members into the campaign where their influence among non-members is really impactful. It also helps direct dollars to the Chamber members who supply the gift cards. And it potentially keeps those members involved in other Chamber initiatives."

For the joining new member, there is an immediate 10% discount off the first

year's membership, provided they join prior to the May deadline.

"We're confident that a two-month campaign will accomplish several of our membership objectives," Covert stated. "We will also be introducing some additional programs aimed at membership retention. That's incredibly important to us as well."

(For more information, contact Jessie Covert at jcovert@blairchamber.com.)

Bill Sell's Bold is a popular regional dining destination



A large part of the early revitalization of Downtown Altoona came from the investment of business leaders like Bill Sell.

If there's one overriding misconception about the restaurant business in Blair County it's that Covid-19 took a sweet situation and turned it sour. Especially as it pertains to the prospects of small restaurants.

"The pandemic has elevated every situation in the restaurant business," acknowledged Bill Sell of Bill Sell's Bold. "Restaurant margins were slim to begin with. Now that small restaurants have to keep up with the pay scale of large worldwide chains, any margin that was being made has now been wiped out. Supply chain issues have impacted every level of the restaurant from availability of items to their raw cost. Needless to



say, it has not been a good time for this industry."

Bold is a small restaurant with a loyal following. Opened twelve years ago by Bill and Brooke Sell on 11th Avenue in Altoona, the restaurant, which has ten employees, is best described as upscale serving American/Latin-styled cuisine.

"You won't find anything on the Bold menu that is on any other menu in town,"

Bill pointed out. "We do our best to provide variety. People seem to appreciate the effort."

Owning and operating a restaurant, according to Sell, can be fraught with peril depending on the day.

"The most significant challenges are the cost of goods and the ability to retain dependable employees," he disclosed. "As a restaurant owner, your main income comes from goods that are highly perishable. Being able to source and move product is the biggest factor in making you successful in this business. The issues with hiring are a close second."

(Bill Sell's Bold has been a Chamber member since 2010.)

SETTING THE PACE

Brandi Noye Golf Committee Co-Chair

- 1. Title and place of work:** Director of Business Development - Altoona - Doing Better Business.
- 2. Years with current position:** Four.
- 3. Positions held in the Chamber:** Chamber Golf Committee member and Co-Chair.
- 4. Community organizations:** Big Brothers Big Sisters of Blair County - Board Member.
- 5. Hobbies/leisure:** Traveling as much as possible. Golfing in the summer.
- 6. Education:** Penn State Altoona Grad.
- 7. First job:** My first job was delivering newspapers for the Altoona Mirror! Started with Doing Better Business as an intern in college and remained on staff.
- 8. Your thoughts about the Chamber:** The Blair



County Chamber of Commerce provides a great atmosphere for business members of the community to gather and meet new people.

9. Your thoughts about Blair County: Born and raised in Blair County, it's been great to see the recent interest in modernizing some of the areas in desperate need. I can't wait to see what the future holds.

Chamber, Mirror to partner on 20-under-40

A joint venture between the Blair County Chamber and the Altoona Mirror is continuing in 2022.

The Mirror is accepting nominations for its 15th edition of "20-Under-40," which will recognize 20 deserving community members younger than 40-years-old in the June edition of Blair Living.

Criteria for nomination includes business success, entrepreneurial spirit and community service. Nominations should include a



brief letter of support. The deadline to nominate is April 11th. Send nominations to Neil Rudel, Managing Editor, Altoona Mirror, 301 Cayuga Avenue, Altoona, PA, 16602 or emailed to nrudel@altoonamirror.com.

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