

So you think you know the Chamber?



Bad guess, good results

If you are the type of person who prefers to make decisions based on the advice of others, you might want to avoid consulting me. My track record is clearly on the questionable side.

I was reminded of my haphazard tendency to pass out "sure-things" predictions a few weeks ago when I attended the monthly meeting of our Sustainable Blair County Chamber of Commerce. It has been fifteen years since a small group of Chamber members visited my office with a request that the Chamber create a committee to address sustainability.

I thought they were kidding. Their spokesperson, a young lady with a healthy mix of confidence and enthusiasm, wasn't about to let me casually dismiss them. Amy Myers was there for a purpose. So I did what most lazy administrators do in that situation. I kicked the decision upstairs. I promised the group that I would add their request to the agenda for the next Board of Directors meeting.

That wasn't good enough. They wanted to present it to the board rather than leaving that task to me. Not a problem, I told them. I had a pretty good sense that the board would listen to what they had to say, would encourage them to look for alternative organizations that would be better suited to their interests, thank them for coming and then move on with the rest of the meeting. I was sure of it.

True to form, my prediction fell flat. It not only wasn't a close vote to approve the new committee, it was unanimous. And as luck would have it, the staffing responsibilities to Sustainable Blair County ended-up with me. As the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished. As lovers of fairy tales know, sometimes the least desirable of circumstances can turn out pretty well. That's what has happened to me and my "tree-huggers." The committee has done some incredible things. Most significantly, they have raised awareness among the business community that sustainability is more than just replacing light bulbs with the most efficient brand of LED's. It's more than avoiding packaging food in Styrofoam.

Elsewhere on this Business Insight page, is a story about the Business Exchange Network that Sustainable Blair County is doing in collaboration with the U.S. Green Chamber of Commerce. It's got great potential! That's one prediction I can stand behind.

With all the programs and events that the Blair County Chamber hosts during the course of a year, it remarkably remains a bit of a mystery, even to its long-time members.

"I didn't know the Chamber did that" is a frequent admission that staff members hear at one point or another, according to Chamber President/CEO Joe Hurd.

"It's confusing and even a little hurtful," Hurd acknowledged. "The only thing that we do that compares to the planning of these events is the manner in which we promote them."

To take a big swing at the gravity of the problem, the Chamber is hosting an event this Thursday in which it hopes to attract as many members and non-members as possible to enjoy good food and drink while also gaining a whole lot of insight on what the organization does and why people should care.

The event is called "HD 500 Special Edition," a modified Business After Hours that will be held at the Heritage Discovery Center in Downtown Altoona

from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Food will be provided by LaJo's Italian Sausage and Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen (formerly The Phoenix). Leivity Brewing Company will provide beverages.

"It's a networking event and an informational event," explained Alex Seltzer of Manpower, who co-chairs the Chamber's Membership Committee, along with Matt Muccitelli of Park Security. "We've got so many exceptional things to make people aware of, that we're hoping we can accomplish that within the two hour time-frame."

The informational part of HD500 will focus attention on the Chamber's 23 current committees, subcommittees and roundtable groups. Each of those will have an 8-foot table to display information about what it does and how it can assist businesses in doing business better.

The tables will line the circumference of the room and each committee will supply two of its members to serve as resources. "We were hoping that we could get enough volunteers from



Jessie Covert of the Chamber discusses details of Thursday's Special Edition HD500 with Vince Eilenberger who manages the Heritage Discovery Center.

the committees willing to spend time at the tables," Seltzer pointed out. "Every committee that we talked to indicated that it had practically its entire committee volunteering. They're enthusiastic about telling their story and possibly recruiting new committee members. That's really impressive."

It was the Membership Committee that came up

with the idea of having an event that could represent the best aspects of what the Chamber is all about. "Since we're businesses working together for the best interests of our community, it made sense to focus on our committees."

Chris Cook, a member of the Membership Committee, started the ball rolling by donating the Discovery

Center to hold the event. Muccitelli stepped-up as one of three sponsors – PennCrest Bank and Webber Advisors are the other two – and those sponsorships will allow Chamber members to attend at no cost. Non-members, who usually pay \$20, will now pay \$10.

To register (and registration is still necessary), visit www.blairchamber.com.

Healthy Workplace Committee finds valuable partner in HRMA



Annis Miller of Central States Manufacturing talks healthy workplace issues with John Myers of Appalachian Running Company.

Since its creation nearly a decade ago, the Healthy Workplace Committee of the Chamber has sought innovative ways to help local businesses bring a wellness component to their day-to-day operations.

"It hasn't always been easy to get the traction necessary to really make a difference," explained Coleen Heim of Healthy Blair County Coalition, who was the first chair of the committee. "Sometimes, finding the right person was the most difficult part of the process."

That search might be over. Thanks to the willingness of about a dozen members of the Human Resources Management Association (HRMA) of Blair County to attend an informational breakfast meeting on February 3rd, hosted by the Healthy

Workplace Committee, some meaningful dialogue took place that should pave the way for future efforts.

"We recognized the importance of sitting down with HR people from some of the businesses that we believed could benefit from what our committee can provide," stated Superman Berrow of B4 Club Therapy, who currently serves as chair. "We understood that they have a lot on their plates besides wellness. So it was great for us to hear that they wanted to explore some opportunities and continue discussions."

What was even more encouraging was that several of the people from HRMA applied to join the Chamber committee.

"They liked what they heard and wanted to be part of it," noted John Myers of Appalachian Running Company, the committee's

vice-chair. "They were intrigued by the upside which focused attention on the benefits to employees and the potential financial benefits to employers."

While the Healthy Workplace Committee has been brainstorming ways to create opportunities that would appeal to employers, it is doing so with a number of important factors in mind. Prominent among those is the intention to broaden its scope of involvement.

"It's incumbent upon us to make sure that we're offering our services to businesses of all sizes," Berrow disclosed. "Our small businesses that might not have access to HR personnel still have the needs and the desire to build and maintain a healthy workplace. We plan to reach out in their direction as well."



Blair County Chamber one of first chambers to participate in BEN

The Blair County Chamber's Sustainability Committee has taken the next step in creating a "greener" community. In collaboration with the U.S. Green Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber is launching a business resource sharing platform, also known as the Business Exchange Network (BEN).

The BEN platform provides ways for businesses to buy, sell or rent resources with each other. This online marketplace allows businesses to find additional assets or generate additional income. Ideally, the platform will be used by Chamber members to create less waste.

"Almost every business has something sitting around that is not being used and is just wasting money. These can be sold or rented to other businesses," said Matt Michrina, chair of Sustainable Blair County.

According to the Pennsylvania Waste Industries Association, approximately 9.6 million tons of municipal waste is generated annually in Pennsylvania. 35.3% of that is considered office and industry supplies.

The Blair County Chamber is the first chamber from the East coast to participate in this new program.

The goal for the Chamber's Sustainability Committee is to reduce waste in Blair County and to support the business community with an innovative way to produce additional income. The committee is encouraging businesses and individual members to create an account and start spreading the news about BEN.

"We are so honored to be collaborating with the Blair County Chamber of Commerce, as they have been at the forefront of business innovation, technologies and networks in the region," said Michelle Thatcher, CEO of the U.S. Green Chamber of Commerce. "They understand the challenges their business community faces and they realize how this technology and network can provide new opportunities for them."

It is free to create a profile for your business or yourself on BEN's website. First, visit ben.usgreenchamber.com/blair and click the "sign up" button. You can then add in your information and confirm that you are a member of the Blair County Chamber. Once you verify the account, you can begin buying, selling and sharing to create a more sustainable Blair County.

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