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Progress has a price

Election season is here again. In case you haven't been paying attention, election season is a lot like deer season except in deer season you hope to shoot an animal and in election season you try to avoid shooting yourself.

I hate to begin a column by denying the sincerity of people's motivations and actions. As the old song goes, "seldom is (Hurd) a discouraging word." I apologize to the people who will be tortured by that reference the next time they hear

Home on the Range.

My greatest concern as I look at the 2023 primary is that the political priorities of too many of the candidates – particularly the ones seeking positions as County Commissioner or School Director – focus on avoiding tax increases. Already the billboards and yard signs scream that message.

As the designated representative of a business organization, it is probably not in my best interest to recommend that anyone, businesses in particular, send more money to any taxing body. Chamber directors have been known to invite career redirection for far less.

I am concerned, however, that our county has spent too much attention on bringing home a balanced budget and too little attention on assuring that the gaping holes in our quality of life framework are adequately addressed.

Most glaring is the burgeoning catastrophe at Blair County Children, Youth and Families. That is the county government agency with the responsibility of responding to the community's concerns regarding the safety of children. That description alone should make it a high priority for every citizen in Blair County. If we're not willing to do whatever needs to be done to guarantee the safety of our children, we've got issues.

When our BASICS Attendance Subcommittee held a two-day symposium last month, participants were dumbfounded to learn that adequate staffing of CYF was set at thirty-seven. The agency had five employees.

It's not fair to blame the commissioners. County government has been underfunded for as long as anyone can remember. The real problem seems to be the reluctance on the part of far too many people to understand that progress comes with a cost. And lack of progress comes with consequences.

As the primary elections approach, it might be a sound idea to ask candidates what they plan to do to improve the area rather than how they plan to avoid spending taxpayer money. Otherwise, we all lose.

Escape Altoona team building fun

Amanda and Rob Eberhart are a Blair County couple who enjoy having fun. Fortunately for their community, the Eberharts are highly motivated to create fun opportunities for others as well.

In 2018, Amanda and Rob opened Escape Altoona on 12th Street in Altoona. It was a decision based on a combination of excitement and altruism.

"Our interest started simply by visiting other escape rooms in Pennsylvania and having an absolute blast!" Amanda acknowledged. "The closest escape room to us at the time was in Pittsburgh. Each escape room offers such a unique experience, we felt we could possibly build one for Altoona. After all, our town deserved one. The industry is growing and we're proud to be part of it."

Escape rooms are time-bound immersive adventure experiences. Teams are locked in a room and are tasked with finding a way to escape. Every escape room is unique.

"There are so many posi-

tives to escape rooms," Amanda explained. "My biggest take-away from the get-go is how cool it is to host groups in age from 8-80 and essentially seeing the same excited reaction not only during but after their experience. Seeing each group work together on solving the puzzles that we designed is personally gratifying."

That doesn't mean there aren't challenges.

"There can be a misconception that escape rooms are scary," Amanda admitted. "Some can be scary but we find that those are few and far between. Another challenge is persuading someone to overcome the lingering concern to fail. Escape rooms, while fun, are meant to be challenging so not everyone escapes in the time allotted. That is a fact. You must start somewhere and we are able to build your confidence and experience for each room you encounter."

Escape Altoona designs and builds its own rooms. It typically takes up to a year to construct an entire room. That's more difficult since Amanda and Rob have



The Escape Altoona team consists of, left to right: Ali Dodson, Amanda Eberhart, Rob Eberhart and Bethany Bingham.

fulltime jobs elsewhere.

"That prolongs our efforts," according to Amanda. "But it also provides other escape rooms with opportunities. The more escape rooms in the area the better because it benefits all of us in some way."

So far, in the case of Escape Altoona, it has meant

the need to expand its services. From its initial location, which Amanda believes was "a perfect fit for us as we began to grow," the company has moved to 2229 Broad Avenue.

"Our dream from the beginning was to eventually own a small piece of Altoona where we were both born and raised," she dis-

closed. "We quickly stumbled-upon the coolest gem along Broad Avenue. It needed so much love but we took-on the project and flipped it during 2022 with so much help from other local companies and loved ones."

(Escape Altoona has been a Chamber member since 2019.)

BASICS symposium focuses on attendance

The similarities are hard to ignore. Too many young people are not coming to school; too many employees are not coming to work. By anyone's standards, the problem has multiple ramifications.

Determining just how deep attendance issues impact the business and education communities in Blair County became the basis of a symposium held in late January and early February. Hosting the event was the Attendance Subcommittee of the Blair County Chamber's BASICS program. BASICS is an acronym for Businesses And Schools Investing in Cooperative Solutions.

"We wanted to get a sense of how serious our county's attendance problems are and who all they're affecting," explained Drew Yingling, chair of the School Counseling Department at Altoona Area High School. Yingling also co-chairs the subcommittee.

"Our subcommittee created a list of people with some connection to attendance," Yingling continued. "That list contained not only school personnel but judges, mental health providers and employers.

This problem is multifaceted. It requires input from a lot of stakeholders. Fortunately, we had a great turnout."

The attendance challenges are not new. Even prior to Covid-19, attendance figures at all Blair County school districts were cause for concern. To no one's surprise, employers were feeling similar headaches. A number reported that overtime costs were causing budgetary overages since those employees who did show-up needed to cover for those who didn't.

"A recurring theme of the symposium was that young people who didn't see the importance of showing-up for school weren't likely to show-up for work as adults either," Yingling pointed out. "It's equally frustrating for educators and employers."

The symposium format was primarily focus groups of 7-8 participants answering questions created by the BASICS Subcommittee. The questions revolved around ways to address specific situations and ultimately build some level of accountability.

"Truancy, which is an



Dr. Charles Prijatelj (left), of AAHS discusses attendance with Jen McConnell of Great Commission and Luke Rhoades of Tyrone Area School District.

issue for all schools, can lead to involvement in the criminal justice system, can increase mental health difficulties as well as greater drug and alcohol use," Yingling acknowledged. "It also impacts the ability to learn. Once students fall behind, it's difficult to catch-up."

Once the symposium was concluded, the subcommittee took all the information

that was discussed and published an executive summary that is the basis of an action plan. That plan will serve as a working document for the foreseeable future, according to Yingling.

"It gives us a tangible place to start," he disclosed. "It also more clearly defines who our partners are in this venture and what we're committed to accomplish.

We recognize that our immediate challenge is to create greater awareness among our community in general. So many people are willing to help but don't know what needs to be done. And others don't know that there's a problem at all. We'll do our best to catch them up."

(For more information on BASICS, contact Joe Hurd at jhurd@blairchamber.com.)

Coming-Up at the Blair County Chamber of Commerce

- The Chamber and Ketrow KURTZ Travel have put together an exciting trip for this fall. From October 24-31, the Chamber will venture to Italy's Amalfi Coast. The informational meeting about the trip will take place tomorrow night (March 21st) from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. at the Devorris Center for Business Development.

- The next Chamber HD 500 (formerly Business After Hours) will be held this Wednesday from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. at Western Edge Seafood Outlet in Duncansville. Come taste what great seafood is all about! Cost to attend is \$10 for members. Non-members, \$20. To register, visit the Chamber's Website at www.blairchamber.com.

- The Young Professionals of Blair County are holding a Trivia Night this Thursday from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at Jethro's. The trivia is alternated between March Madness and Saint Patrick's Day. The cost to attend is \$10 for Chamber members and \$15 for non-members. Register by calling 814-943-8151 or online at www.blairchamber.com.

- The Chamber's WE-LEAd Committee will hold a professional development program this Thursday from noon to 1:30 p.m. at U.S. Hotel in Hollidaysburg. Rebecca Young will present "Knowing Your Value and Negotiating Your Salary." Cost is \$25 for Chamber members. Non-members, \$30 Register at www.blairchamber.com.



Rebecca Young

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