

HURD IMMUNITY

Venting once again

It's crybaby time. According to my critics (and they are many!), once each year I "waste" a Hurd Immunity column taunting and criticizing the businesses in our community that still haven't pulled the trigger on membership in the Blair County Chamber.

In the spirit of tradition, let the wasting begin . . .

As the merger between the Chamber and Altoona-



Joe Hurd

Blair County Development Corporation continues to show great promise, the one area of real concern is the inability to attract a greater percentage of the business community to help carry the load as members. The more businesses that step-up, the more we can expect to accomplish. We sell that concept to every potential member that we recruit.

It shouldn't be a tough sell. Take a close look at the Blair County economy and then consider the factors that influence the growth of that economy. Compare those to the mission of the Chamber. It's an incredible resemblance. Businesses, in all honesty, should be begging to join. Yet the Chamber still struggles to maintain a 20% market share.

So what are the sticking-points that keep so many businesses from joining? We don't have to wonder. Those businesses are willing to share their opinions and it's fairly discouraging when they do. A recent survey targeted people who had never joined the Chamber and people who had been members at one time but stepped away. The common theme? "We really didn't get much out of it."

That's a problem that can seldom be fixed. It's a similar problem that keeps our churches half-full. Rather than looking for ways to strengthen those elements of society that benefit the greatest number of people, we've become purveyors of single-mindedness. It's not even "me first." It's just "me."

I'm pretty certain, after twenty-seven years of rallying the troops for the common good, that there's very little magic left in attempting to sell a concept to people reluctant to buy. That is not to say that what we offer is impossible to turn down. We've missed the mark on more than a few occasions. We try to base what we do on what our members tell us they need. Our programs and events reflect those priorities.

Finishing a column like this one is always more difficult than starting one. Am I a pouter or do I really believe that people who won't join my Chamber are greedy and mean-spirited?

To that one, I'm not really sure that I want the answer.

Investors impressed with YEA! students

The highest profile event of the Blair County Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) program was held March 26th at the Penn State Altoona Devorris Downtown Center. The Investor Panel Presentation provided sixteen YEA! students the opportunity to move their businesses forward with the financial assistance of twelve community businesses.

"This is the event that the students point-to from the start of the program back in October," explained YEA! Program Manager Tim Gildea. "It not only validates that the students are on the right track as aspiring entrepreneurs, it provides a helpful push as the business ideas begin to have price tags attached to them."

The twelve businesses that stepped-up as investors are: UPMC Altoona, Sheetz, Inc., Reliance Bank, Leonard S. Fiore, Inc., Empower Business Solutions, Ward Transport and Logistics, NPC, Inc., Keller Engineers,

Seltzer Financial Strategies, Curry Supply Holdings, Blair Companies and McLanahan Corporation.

"Those same twelve businesses have served as investors for the past four years," Gildea pointed out. "We're grateful for their ongoing support. They've kept YEA! at a high level."

That part has been relatively simple, according to Scott Cox, CFO of Reliance Bank. "YEA! is a program that positively impacts our entire community," he admitted.

"The students have real opportunities to showcase their skills and build on their leadership within the entrepreneurial journey."

Joe Keller, President of Keller Engineers agreed. "The students are always well-prepared, well-spoken and energetic," Keller noted. "This particular group may have been the best we've seen in all five years that we've invested. They were really good."

Travis Sheetz, President of Sheetz, Inc., felt that the presentations were creative and



William Zhu (center), a sophomore at Hollidaysburg High School, was chosen the outstanding entrepreneur at the YEA! Investor Panel Event. At left is Tim Balconi, an investor from UPMC Altoona; at right is Josh Barnhart who served as William's mentor.

engaging, "displaying the passion these young men and women have for their ideas."

For Andrea Cohen of Blair Companies, a critical factor in how well the students performed in presenting their business concepts was how well they worked together.

"We hadn't seen that in

previous years, at least not to this extent," Cohen acknowledged. "There was a real connection and an effort to support one another. That's a good sign for anyone in business."

Beyond the funding decision of the investors was the selection of the Most Outstanding Business and the runner-up. William Zhu, a

sophomore at Hollidaysburg Senior High School got the top spot with his business, "TitraTech." Calibrate, a partnership involving Hollidaysburg students John Bauman and Cristian White, finished second. Zhu will represent the local YEA! chapter at the YEA! National Competition May 1-3 in Rochester, New York.

Early Childhood Symposium addresses critical challenges



The challenges related to Early Childhood Education in Blair County were the basis of a symposium attended by providers, agency reps and school district administrators.

A not-so-funny thing happened when those associated with Early Childhood Education in Blair County assumed that the worst consequences of Covid-19 were behind them. They should never have looked back.

To help assess exactly where the obstacles to great childcare opportunities exist, the Blair County Chamber's BASICS Subcommittee on Early Childhood Education held a symposium on March 26th at the Devorris Center for Business Development. Thirty childcare providers, local educators and agency professionals spent nearly a half-day sharing experiences and opinions, culminating in the development of the

framework for a strategy.

"We had tremendous participation from a roomful of people who share a passion for helping very young people," explained Rodney Green, who chairs the Chamber's subcommittee. "We know that everyone values early learning and quality programs but today we had a chance to talk about it and strategize ways to address this very important community problem."

This symposium follows a similar one held two years ago.

"This is our second symposium but our first opportunity to gather people together from our school districts to see what measures have already been taken

so that nothing is duplicated," Green noted. "One of the most significant advantages of what we did today was to create avenues of collaboration for future events. This can't be effective unless people stay engaged."

Among the symposium participants were Andrea Heberlein, Executive Director of Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission, Stephanie Doliveira, who co-chairs that Commission and Dan Hoover, an emeritus member of the Commission.

"Having people in the room who can move the message forward in the right circles is an important factor in making needed progress," Green admitted.

Public Policy Committee to host 80th District Q&A



Members of the Chamber's Public Policy Committee discuss possible questions for an upcoming candidate Q&A.

The Public Policy Committee of the Blair County Chamber will spend its next regularly scheduled meeting on April 4th learning more about the business priorities of the two Republican candidates for State Representative in the 80th District.

Incumbent Jim Gregory and challenger Scott Barger will answer questions from the committee. That Q&A will be videoed and then made available to the public on Altoona Public Access and at least two YouTube sites.

"As the most high-profile race of this primary season, our committee felt that it was important to see how each of these candidates prioritize business issues," explained Lisa Hann of Family Services, Inc., who

chairs the committee. Initially, the committee discussed hosting a debate between the candidates but felt that a format which brought them in separately would provide flexibility and less possible conflict.

"Both candidates will answer the same questions," Hann pointed out. "We've allocated twenty minutes for each candidate and we'll designate a timer to increase the chance that the full slate of questions will be answered."

Only members of the Public Policy Committee will be permitted to attend the meeting. Gregory's time slot will be 8:10 to 8:30 a.m.; Barger's 8:40 to 9:00. Times to view the video, including a video link, will be posted on the Chamber's social media channels.

Curve's Robby Hammock to headline Breakfast Club

The new manager of the Altoona Curve will be the keynote speaker at the next Blair County Chamber "Breakfast Club," set for April 11th at 7:45 a.m. at The Casino at Lakemont Park.

Robby Hammock, who spent last season as the

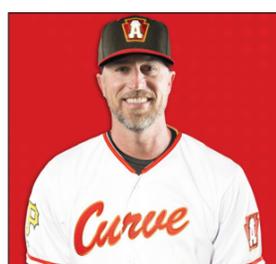
manager of the Greensboro Grasshoppers, the High-A affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates, will provide an overview of the upcoming Curve season and answer questions from attendees.

Hammock was also a longtime player in the Major Leagues and has the

special distinction of catching Randy Johnson's Perfect Game in 2004 while a member of the Arizona Diamondbacks. He was drafted three times; in 1995 by the Florida Marlins, in 1997 by the Tampa Bay Rays and by the Diamondbacks in 1998.

The cost to attend Break-

fast Club is \$20 for Chamber members and \$30 for non-members. To register, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 or online at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the April Breakfast Club is Pinnacle Professionals Services.



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