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Flarend brings energy options to consumers

The topic of renewable energy has been an ongoing passion for Richard Flarend and few understand or appreciate its potential to the extent that the 55-year-old native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana does. Not only has Flarend built a successful business (Groundhog Solar), he's also an accomplished author, a retired college professor and former political candidate for statewide office.

The Chamber: When did you start Groundhog Solar? What was the impetus for starting it?

Richard: I guess I have always been interested in how to make things work more efficiently. One of the first interactions I ever had with the Chamber was to offer a "Lunch and Learn" about energy efficiency and saving money on utility bills. I taught a class for a long time on that topic, wrote a book about renewable energy, and

my research at Penn State involved renewable energy. So starting Groundhog Solar seemed like the natural evolution of my life's interest.

The Chamber: How would you describe Groundhog Solar to someone completely unfamiliar with it?

Richard: Groundhog Solar is a company that designs and sells solar energy systems. Groundhog Solar has grown into a multi-million dollar business and is set to install a couple megawatts of solar this year. We have been growing continuously over the past 14 years and will be opening our showroom in downtown Altoona later this year as well as an outdoor

The Chamber: What are the most significant changes that you've noticed over the past decade regarding the public's interest in solar?

Richard: Solar used to be this novel experimental thing that a few people would tinker with but wasn't assumed to be mainstream. But solar

Chamber Q&A

has now moved into the mainstream. I think everyone knows about solar now, but probably not everyone knows how inexpensive it can be and how well it works.

The Chamber: Based on the heightened interest in alternative energy sources, what might you predict for solar in the next decade?

Richard: Solar is already the cheapest form of energy we have and is still getting less costly, or at least not more expensive like most other things. I expect that more and more solar will be built and a greater amount of our energy will come from solar over the next decade. I think most people know that energy during the day is more expensive than at night and that's one of the reasons why solar is great, it generates the



Richard Flarend (center) explains the value of solar to potential customers at the Home Garden and Healthy Living Showcase.

expensive energy that we need. I expect that more battery storage will be built so that this energy can then be stored and used for other times during the day. This is already happening in other parts of the country, so I'm sure it will happen here too.

The Chamber: As a former college professor, how difficult has it been to walk away from that career to pursue other opportunities?

Richard: Yes, of course

being a college professor was a rewarding job for many years and it took me a while to make the move into this new career full-time. But at some level, I'm still doing the same thing. I'm teaching people about technology that is here now and that can improve their lives and pocketbooks.

The Chamber: Some people might remember that you ran for State Representative a few years ago.

Any future plans to seek political office?

Richard: That was a very interesting experience, and fundamentally I still want to serve my community and country. The best way to do that is keep Groundhog Solar going and growing. Bringing inexpensive and renewable DOMESTIC energy to Central Pennsylvania. Offering great jobs and keeping money moving around in the local community.

New Awards Gala will combine recognition and socialization



Preparing to launch a new event will take time and diligence for Chamber staff members like (from left): Jennifer Fleck, Megan Rossman and Jessie Covert.

For many years, the Blair County Chamber used its Annual Breakfast Meeting and its Business Hall of Fame Dinner to confer all but two of its awards to deserving businesses and individuals. Only the Lifetime Achievement Award for Business Excellence and the Agricultural Community Excellence Award were presented at other events.

On June 20th, that will change. That evening, an Awards Gala will be held at the Blair County Convention Center. The event will include a Red Carpet Reception, recognize the award recipients and end the evening with a live band and dancing.

"We value the opportunity to recognize people and businesses who are making an impact in the community," explained Jennifer Fleck of the Chamber. "The nomination process is now open and we've streamlined the process. You can find the award criteria and the nomination form on the Chamber website at www.blairchamber.com."

The deadline for nominations is Friday, April 26th. Among the awards to be presented are: ATHENA Award, Business of the Year, Small Business of the Year, Non-Profit Spotlight, Judith A. Rossi Educator of the Year, Donna D. Gority Servant Leadership Award, Joseph P. Rosenhamer

Chamber Spirit Award and the George Award.

This event will be a significant opportunity to create additional synergy for the recent merger that resulted in the creation of the Blair County Alliance for Business and Economic Growth, according to Alliance President/CEO Steve McKnight.

"The new Alliance between ABCD Corporation and the Chamber has given us the opportunity to rethink and elevate some of our hallmark events. We restructured our Annual meeting this year which allowed for a renewed focus on the Chamber's special recognitions and awards.

"Given the tradition and importance of those awards, moving the event to a more formal, evening affair with our recipients being the center of attention was a logical next step. This will be our Oscar night so-to-speak with high socials, music and great food for all those that attend."

Fleck encourages Chamber members and non-members to submit nominations for the various awards. "It's really important to support someone or their business as we celebrate their success."

Your Building Center helping customers reach lofty heights



Tim Leupold, president of Your Building Centers, has been encouraged by the way his employees have remained engaged following Covid-19 challenges.

"Helping Our Customers Build the American Dream."

To promote an objective of that magnitude, a company would need to have great confidence, the kind of confidence that is hewn from an impressive reputation. Especially one dating back more than 100 years.

Your Building Centers check all the boxes for dream building. By definition, the company is a lumber and materials dealer servicing professional contractors and serious do-it-yourselfers throughout much of Pennsylvania with design centers showcasing millwork, kitchen, bath and flooring products with three component manufacturing plants.

The company currently boasts 20 locations: Altoona (Corporate Office), Allensville, Bedford, Berlin, Dubois, Elizabethville, Everett, Hanover, Huntingdon (2), Lewistown, Lock Haven, Milton, Muncy, Palmerton, Philipsburg, State College, Sunbury, and Williamsport. Altoona, Huntingdon, State

College and Williamsport also have design centers. That's quite an array of communities.

"I think people in the region would be surprised as to how big we have become," acknowledged Tim Leupold, YBC's President since last May. He's been with the company for the past 20 years and in the industry for the past 38.

At a time when many businesses have struggled to find employees, YBC has been able to maintain most of its workforce. That workforce numbers 460. The secret? Since 2016, 100% of the company's employees are also part-owners. According to Leupold, that incentive has made an incredible difference.

"When we interview people, they are excited to be part of an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan)," he admitted. "It's very appealing to have ownership instead of just working to make someone else money. Our profits go back to our

employee/owners at the end of the year in the form of a bonus and stock."

As a result, YBC is the largest employee-owned lumber and building material supplier in Pennsylvania.

"The tagline, 'We care because we own it' isn't just a way to brag about having great employees, it's also a promise to our customers that they'll always get our best effort in price and service," Leupold explained.

A high percentage of those customers are contractors.

"We've been contractor-focused since the beginning," according to Leupold. "We have 35 outside salesmen that call on contractors daily. Additionally, we offer a rewards program for contractors through which they can earn points that may be redeemed for trips, credit on account or a variety of gift cards.

"We do our best to make everyone we deal with feel important."

(YBC has been a Chamber member since 1989.)

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