

HURD IMMUNITY

Fortifying weak links

Blair County is a wonderful place to live, work and raise a family. I impart that message several times a day to anyone who will listen. As the grand poobah of the



Joe Hurd

Chamber, it's expected. But it's a lot easier to do when you actually believe it. Sadly, not everyone is drinking the Kool-Aid. Among the skeptics are an organization in Pittsburgh advocating for an increase in passenger rail service and a whole bunch of trail enthusiasts promoting the health (and financial) potential of the great outdoors.

The rail issue is not a new one. The Chamber's Transportation Committee has had more than a few discussions with Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail. That group has been advocating for more ways to get more riders from the PA border to at least Harrisburg and likely beyond. The snag appears to be in our backyard.

It seems that the lack of available lines or at least the reluctance of Norfolk Southern to free-up profitable freight lines for additional passenger lines creates a problem with no easy solution. Not sure that situation will be resolved any time soon.

The trails dilemma might be more resolvable if people in Blair County will support a good deal when they see one. At a time when the Southern Alleghenies Region is looking for opportunities to attract businesses, tourists and reinforcements to a shrinking population, outdoor recreation would be an incredible use of our resources. Trails, in particular, have shown an impressive upside as trail towns emerge in even the most remote locations.

The downside? The hesitation to pull the trigger. Blair County has a number of daunting challenges ahead. The county needs a new prison. It has serious pension problems. Without a sharp investment strategy, those challenges will get worse instead of better. Our County Commissioners know that. They also know that counties like Cambria and Somerset face similar obstacles yet agreed to fund efforts to move the needle forward on trail development. Blair County continues to rely on volunteers to oversee the limited amount of progress taking place here.

Once again, Blair County must wear the mantle of the "weakest link," at least for the time being. Indications are, however, that Commissioners Kessling, Burke and Webster are aggressively pursuing ways to put the county in a position to benefit from favorable circumstances while that window remains open.

We should encourage them.

Manges helping to transform lives

After a long, successful career in the corporate world, Heather Manges wasn't averse to changing directions, especially if that change would make an impact on the lives of so many people in her local community. Heather is currently Executive Director of Wright Place for Kids, an integral part of Altoona's Nehemiah Project. Her enthusiasm alone has made a critical difference in the success of that venture. Heather and her husband Richard are parents of four children and a 7-month-old grandchild.

The Chamber: How would you explain the Nehemiah Project to someone completely unfamiliar with it?

Heather: The Nehemiah Project has a heart to serve the local community in multiple ways. We want to help build families faith and future by offering multiple programs and partnering with many organizations in our city. Some of these organizations reside in the Wright Place for Kids or lease space to serve the community. We want to add value to people, be able to meet them exactly where they are and empower them for a bright future. Whether an individual struggles with social deprivation, limited

Chamber Q&A

economic opportunities or an individual that appears to be doing well from the outside and is suffering on the inside.

The Chamber: What would people in Blair County be surprised to know about the Nehemiah Project?

Heather: I wish I had a nickel for every time someone said to me, after they did a complete tour of the Nehemiah Project, "We just didn't know that the Nehemiah Project did so much". One that is always a big surprise to individuals is that we have newly renovated eight classrooms on our 3rd floor with 4 more classrooms to go. In these classrooms we offer finance, parenting, job interview, smart buying and a variety of life skill classes.

The Chamber: As Executive Director, how responsible do you feel to be effective in raising money, providing direction and recruiting volunteers?

Heather: Going from the Corporate world to the 501C3 world has been very interesting to me and quite the learning journey. I re-



Heather Manges has successfully taken her experience in the corporate world to help serve the growing needs of the local community.

member looking at applications yearly for our asks for grants. I was always so careful on my selection and what would impact the community the most with their vision or current programs. It was fulfilling to write those checks and then volunteer in those locations to help those visions come to life. But now I get to be on the other side.

The Chamber: Of what are you most proud through your work at the Nehemiah Project?

Heather: Our team is most

proud of the lives that we have impacted and transformed to have a bright future over the last year. We have hundreds graduate from the programs we offer for children, adults and families. We have up to 300 people enter our building a day to participate in our programs or volunteer. It has been so heart filling to watch the old Wright elementary building come alive this year.

The Chamber: If you could wave a magic wand and make something hap-

pen at the Nehemiah Project that hasn't happened (yet), what would it be?

Heather: Our renovations to be complete at the Wright Place for Kids. We need our bathrooms remodeled so they are all working properly and a new elevator. These old bathrooms cannot sustain our increased traffic in our building. In return we are spending thousands of dollars in repairs. This completion will allow us to move on to filling our vacant properties.

A focus on the Outdoors: Chamber creates new Trail/Recreation Subcommittee

Blair County is a four-season mountain community. Our trails, rivers, lakes and slopes help to attract and retain people, their spending power and investment. This is especially true post pandemic. That is why the Chamber has created the Outdoor Recreation and Active Transportation Subcommittee.

Unlike private sector destinations and amusements, our land and water trails are generally considered civic assets. With increased demand for trails and trail development, municipal governments across the Commonwealth are incorporating and expanding these assets into their management and oversight. The availability and use of trails provides a positive economic impact and return on their development and maintenance.

"Many outdoor recreation projects are underway across Blair County which will complement neighboring trails like Rothrock, Allegripis, and Ghost

Town Trails. Forming a group to help monitor and coordinate these projects is critical," said Blair County Commissioner Dave Kessling, who has agreed to serve as Chair of the new subcommittee. "The County is looking at ways it can support outdoor asset development and working directly with the business community and trail users is very important," Kessling added.

This new group is a subcommittee of the Chamber's full Transportation Committee. The subcommittee's initial goals and activities include but are not limited to the following:

- Advise/Support the Blair County Commissioners with County trail planning efforts
- Support the Horseshoe Curve Multi-use Trail network planning and development
- Promote and assist in the development of the 9-11 National Memorial Trail



Land and water trails may hold the key to a strong economy in Blair County.

• Advocate for greater trail connectivity for both recreation and active transportation uses.

• Identify infrastructure gaps and close those gaps through resource identification

• Further development and promotion of the Bells Gap trail and related con-

nections

• Identify and promote "Share the Road" opportunities where they present

• Advise on Economic Development efforts to support small business creation

• Monitor and support the multi-county - ATV study effort

The subcommittee currently includes a broad representation of trail users, funders and municipal interests. If you are a Chamber member and interested in joining this important subcommittee, please contact Jen Fleck, Director of Chamber Operations at jfleck@blairchamber.com.

Breakfast Club to feature Secretary of DCED

Although the Blair County Chamber doesn't have a Breakfast Club during July, the program on August 8th will be one that the business community won't want to miss. The speaker at that event will be Rick Siger, the Commonwealth's Secretary of the

Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).

Siger, a Pittsburgh native and graduate of Columbia University, was appointed to his current position in May of 2023 by Governor Josh Shapiro. Prior to that, he had served as Chief of

Staff and Senior Advisor to the President of Carnegie Mellon University. He had also served President Barack Obama for more than seven years in multiple roles, including as Chief of Staff at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

The cost to attend the Breakfast Club is \$20 for Chamber members and \$30 for non-members. To register, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 or register online at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the August Breakfast Club is Care Compass.



Secretary Rick Siger

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