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PROGRESS CHENANGO

AN EVENING SUN PUBLICATION

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The Evening Sun turns 130 years old

Tyler Murphy
Sun Managing Editor



On March 16, 2021 The Evening Sun celebrated its 130th anniversary, serving as Chenango County's Hometown Daily Newspaper since 1891.

The Evening Sun is the descendant of the first and only daily newspaper founded in the county, which was called the Morning Sun.

In the editorial column of the very first Morning Sun, the following address was delivered by the editor and it still rings true today:

"The Morning Sun will be issued every day except Sundays. It will be thoroughly independent and especially so as regards to politics and religion.

"It will publish the news from day to day in a truthful and concise manner and in every way try to advocate such needed reforms as will be of lasting benefit to every man, woman and child in the beautiful village of Norwich."

"The paper will be under efficient management and editorial writers will devote their entire time to making The Morning Sun a bright, interesting and readable newspaper."

Statistically speaking, a community of this size shouldn't still have a daily newspaper. There just aren't many newspapers of our size still in print.

The Evening Sun is special in that regard, made even more rare by the fact that we are an independently-owned publication.

The history of this newspaper is as rich and deep as the history of Norwich itself. The paper has more or less dedicated itself to having a daily edition almost every weekday for the last 130 years but our actual history goes back even further if you count older weekly publications.

The very first newspaper in Norwich was created on Nov. 14, 1816 when J.F. Hubbard began publishing The Norwich Journal for 2 cents a copy.

The Journal continued to be published successfully for several years, changing hands numerous times.

In 1877, publisher B. Gage Berry changed the name to The Chenango Semi-Weekly Telegraph, with an issue coming out every Wednesday and Saturday mornings at a cost of two dollars per year. Eventually, The Telegraph merged with The Norwich Sun nearly a century later.

The paper became a daily publication in 1981. The paper was first known as The Morning Sun, later becoming The Norwich Sun, and finally, The Evening Sun.

The Morning Sun was first published by Reed Campbell in a little building on Mechanic Street, which was razed several decades ago for a YMCA addition. The first daily issue was six pages long, with 17 columns of display advertising.

On March 7, 1904, the name of the paper became The Norwich Sun, having changed from a morning to an afternoon publication time.

In 1961, a similar change from afternoon to later evening publication prompted the name change to The Evening Sun.

The name of the newspaper remains so today, even though it is off the presses in downtown Norwich by the noon hour; delivery is later in the outer regions of the county.

Over the years, the paper has been headquartered in several locations, from Mechanic Street to Lackawanna Avenue to Hale Street and back to Lackawanna. The newspaper's printing plant on Hale Street was built in 1971; in 2002, it was sold when the newspaper's printing operations moved to the current Sun Printing facility in the Borden Avenue warehouse.

In 1996, the editorial and sales staffs moved their headquarters from Hale Street to Lackawanna Avenue, just a few doors down from The Sun's former home.

The Evening Sun was purchased by Snyder Communications on May 2, 1994. For the first time in over 15 years, The Evening Sun was again owned locally, this time by a growing family of successful companies which employ over 200.

So, here we are today, almost 130 years later, still going strong in an industry which, like so many others, has suffered some devastating blows and challenges.

Commerce Chenango tackles big projects in 2021, major plans for 2022

By Sarah Genter
Sun Staff Writer

CHENANGO COUNTY — In spite of the pandemic, Commerce Chenango managed to accomplish great things in 2021, and has several plans in store for 2022.

Made up of a Board of Directors, and a 40-plus group of volunteers that serve on the Executive Committee, Finance and Audit Committee, Governance and Policy Committee, and the Memberships and Programs Committee, Commerce Chenango strives to advocate for and support local businesses.

"Our mission is to do good work for Chenango County, to bring resources to businesses, to be an advocate for those businesses, help people grow their ideas, be a partner to our local officials and state agencies in every way possible, and just do good work for



Elected officials participating in a question and answer forum with attendees at the Commerce Chenango Legislative Breakfast. (Submitted photo)

the community. That sort of encompasses all the boards together," said Commerce Chenango CEO and President Kerri Green.

In 2020 and 2021, Commerce Chenango not only continued their regular operations, they also imple-

mented new services to help local businesses get through an unprecedented two years.

Adapting to COVID

Throughout the pandemic, Green served as a liaison with several organizations to stay up to date on current information, guide-

lines, and restrictions related to COVID. This allowed Commerce Chenango to provide the most accurate information to local businesses during an uncertain time.

"I helped liaison with Department of Health, and

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Norwich restaurant owners reflect on the impact of COVID-19

By Sarah Genter
Sun Staff Writer

NORWICH — It's no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on the service industry. Restrictions and guidelines forced many restaurants to switch to take out orders only, reduce staff, and for some, to close their doors for good.

"From my point of view, I think it's been difficult for them," said former City of Norwich Mayor Shawn Sastri. "You know, government has come down and put these mandates on them that they have to close or limit their hours, and that's their livelihood, right? That's how they make money, and it's been tough."

State and federal government has held the reins in regard to COVID guidelines, which unfortunately left local government unable to do much to lift restrictions imposed on food service in the city.

"I guess the only thing that I've really done is try to support them as much as I could, you know? A lot of the mandates that came down

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Park Place Sports Bar and Grill employee Pamela Hufnagle pouring a draft of one of the dozens of beers available at Park Place. (Photo by Sarah Genter)

Wild Owl Cafe owner Joe Isaacs prepares cafe pasta, a dinner special that has become a classic at the local fan-favorite restaurant. Isaacs took the helm as sole owner of the Wild Owl in November of 2021. (Photo by Sarah Genter)



Norwich restaurant owners reflect on the impact of COVID-19 —

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were from the state, and we didn't really have much control over that," said Sastri.

Despite the many challenges the pandemic posed, local restaurants pushed through, and bounced back after restrictions were lifted. For many Norwich restaurants, COVID-19 proved to be a hurdle, but one that was overcome through the support of their patrons.

Now, they're looking forward. New developments and growth are on the horizon for several local eateries.

Wild Owl Cafe

After its grand opening in 2016, the Wild Owl Cafe quickly became a local fan-favorite. The cozy establishment features classic eats such as breakfast sandwiches and meals, burgers and paninis, dinner specials, as well as their signature "abeetz"; flatbread pizzas available in a variety of styles.

The restaurant also touts appetizers, desserts, and a selection of wine and beer. Located in the heart of downtown Norwich at 28 South Broad Street, and open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sunday, and 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Monday, the Wild Owl Cafe is easily a Norwich staple.

In November of 2021, the cafe switched hands from prior owner and founder Mike LaCroce, to employee Joe Isaacs. Isaacs began working at the Wild Owl in 2017 as a



An Ontario customer being served a bowl of soup by an employee. Owner of The Ontario Cynthia Thompson said the restaurant wouldn't have made it through the pandemic without the support of their patrons and the dedication of their staff. (Photo by Sarah Genter)

dishwasher, and worked his way up to partner in August of 2021 before officially taking over as sole owner.

"I, of course, have a bunch of ideas I want to try for the menu," said Isaacs. "I mean, we'll still have all the old Wild Owl favorites, I don't plan on getting rid of the staples. But I would like to add a few of my own things."

He said when the pandemic began, the Wild Owl had to switch to providing takeout only, as well as temporarily lay off their staff for about six months.

"I wasn't the owner then, but I know when everything was shut down and you couldn't go out that they sur-

vived solely on takeout and pickup," he explained. "The staff suffered because they had to lay everyone off, and the owners at the time were doing it just them, and that's all they needed. So that's how they survived. Just zero labor costs and just takeout and pickup orders."

But, when the restaurant was able to fully open again, Isaacs said business picked back up. The staff also implemented a cleaning and sanitizing regimen to ensure the safety of their customers.

"Somebody comes in and cleans every day. So we have two different maintenance staff that come in and clean the bathrooms, wipe the

floors. And the servers and everybody is supposed to be wiping down tables and surfaces, and we have hand sanitizer out," said Isaacs. "You clean, you wipe down every table. We've got the new menus with the laminate, you can keep them clean. So best practice, good hygiene. That's all you can hope for."

While the Wild Owl was able to make it through the height of the pandemic, Isaacs said that moving forward, it would be best for restaurants and other businesses to make choices for themselves, instead of being restricted by government mandates.

"It's like I tell my employ-

ees, I just want to give you the best resources to best do your job. And from what I've seen, government involvement, if it's forcing people to do things that is not good for their life and their business, it's not good," he said. "People have a right to open their businesses and make a life for themselves, and support a family and everything. So whatever they can do to help people get back to their normal lives, that would probably be the best."

"Yeah, let people protect themselves, give them the best information and resources to protect themselves as they see fit. But forcing ridiculous mandates and regulations on people just hurts everybody," he added.

Recent spikes in COVID cases are reminiscent of the early days of the pandemic. Mask mandates are returning, and the wake of government-mandated shutdowns can cause continued fear for local business owners, who depend on their establishments for primary income.

"I left my job of 13 years to do this," said Isaacs. "That I was guaranteed because, where I came from, they're essential. So I never stopped working through this whole thing. But now, yeah, if they shut everything down again then that's my livelihood now, you know? So that's why I say it's best for them to stay out of it."

But, should certain mandates return, the Wild Owl is already equipped to handle

them. "We provided masks for our employees then, we can do it again," said Isaacs. "We have plenty of sanitizer, we buy it by the gallon. And like I said, we clean our bathrooms every day and even sometimes, in some cases, twice a day."

While COVID fears may linger, Isaacs is choosing to focus on the future of his business. Some changes include new dishes on the menu, staff development days, and donations to local law enforcement agencies and other organizations.

Another big development as new owner was his increased support of other local businesses by utilizing their services and purchasing their products.

"I'm a big believer in, you know, 'shop local.' I know that's a thing around here," said Isaacs. "I buy my meat locally, we buy it from Drover Hill Farms which is a local meat farm in West Edmeston. And I get fresh bagels a couple times a week from the Cottage Bakery across the street, and we get farm raised eggs from a local farm here in town."

"We just did our menus, so we used Norwich Copies. They're a lot better than trying to copy it here," he continued. "We support our local law enforcement, we donate to them."

Additionally, the Wild Owl also participates in "Give Back Nights," which support

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"The DISH/WiFi Guys In Sherburne"

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local nonprofits. During a Give Back Night, a portion of proceeds from sales at the cafe will be donated to the nonprofit of choice for that evening.

"We usually do give back nights [on] Wednesday nights at any given point, and if anybody asks I usually try and fit them in somewhere," said Isaacs.

Aside from staying involved in the community, Isaacs said he hopes to see the Wild Owl continue to thrive in this upcoming year.

"I'm always hoping that the business grows. I want to get to a point where we have a good steady business flow and customer flow, and get our staff good and trained and up to speed," he said. "I plan on making a new menu, and just kind of taking where the previous ownership started from and building on it. Cause I've already got a great foundation here, and I want to make it better, if I can. Or at least keep what's good, going."

Park Place and Fred's Inn

Two other Norwich staples are Fred's Inn and Park Place Sports Bar and Grill, owned by father-son duo Armando and David Cirello. Fred's Inn was purchased by Armando on Valentine's Day in 1977, and Park Place was purchased by the pair in 2008.

Fred's Inn is located just outside of the city, at 5149 NY-12 in Norwich, and offers a full menu of appetizers, meat and seafood entrees, sandwiches, burgers, and more. The establishment also serves as a hotel with 25 guest rooms available. Their hours are 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday through Saturday, and 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Sundays.

Park Place is a popular bar and grill located in downtown Norwich at 7 East Park Place. The menu sports traditional pub favorites like chicken wings, burgers, pizza, sandwiches, sliders, and much more.

Nightly food specials, a full bar, off track betting, and quick draw games are another big draw for the restaurant. Park Place opens at 11 a.m. daily and serves food until 9 p.m., while the bar stays open for varying hours.

Luckily, the popularity of these two neighborhood eateries kept them going

throughout the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Back a year ago in March we were actually shut down for three months, that was horrific. But other than that, we've been fortunate. We've been pretty steady," said owner Dave Cirello. "Our business is still growing. When I look back, I kind of compare it back to two years ago, 2019, because last year was just a different year for everyone."

Even with their continued success, Park Place and Fred's Inn were not immune to the effects of the pandemic. From closing down to coping with mask mandates, Cirello's businesses felt the impact.

"The only real things that have kind of impacted us is all the mask mandates, and any time there's some sort of outbreak or a new variant, everybody seems to get a little bit nervous, holds back, business slows down again," said Cirello. "But then ultimately it starts coming back around. This last time hasn't impacted us very much, I don't think."

The load was also made a little lighter by the Chenango County Health Department, which has proven to be a valuable resource for restaurants in the area.

"The health department works with us. Isaiah Sutton and Melanie Manwarren, when I call they're very helpful. [And] Dave Gorman. They're very helpful and considerate, and they're understanding and they're trying to work with you, and if you need anything you can call them," said Cirello. "They're trying to work with you, absolutely, [rather] than trying to be a hindrance to your business, and it's a great thing."

There were some unexpected side effects of the pandemic, however. Namely, food shortages. Things like chicken wings, tater tots, and eggs were among the items that became either hard to get, or that saw a significant price hike.

"Chicken wings. Everybody knows that one. I used to give them half off, and they have tripled in price. There's times where I can't even get them. And yes, I'm still facing products that, I know this is going to sound crazy but, tater tots. I can't get tater tots," Cirello explained. "It was onion

rings, and then it was chicken, and now they're saying it's going to be eggs."

"You can't buy that many eggs because it's perishable, but do I start buying chicken tenders and boneless wings and stacking up my freezers? How do you know?" he added.

While the service industry may be better off now than at the start of the pandemic, the ramifications and aftermath of the past two years remain constant in the minds of restaurant owners.

"I love my customers," said Cynthia Thompson, reminiscing on her memories as a business owner. "The friendships I've made, I would say that that's what I treasure the most. Meeting people, and your customers become your family, too."

"I worry about, all the time, inflation and the cost of goods. And there seems like now there's no end, there's no cap, there's no future," said Cirello. "COVID is maybe done, but we're still having problems with getting some products and supplies in. So it's still affecting everyone, and there's really no end in sight."

But, fears aside, Cirello kept moving forward. He said he's made consistent improvements to his establishments over the past year, and is always looking for more ways to improve his restaurants.

"I'm always looking to do more. We're always fixing everything, every week. You know, if something needs to be painted, anything we can think of to make the place better. We just move the place forward constantly," he said. "You'd be surprised how much you can accomplish in a year by just doing that. You look back and you go, wow, we really made a lot of changes. Or, oh this place looks so much nicer than it did a year ago. That's what we just keep trying, to make it better. Just keep trying to enhance the business all the time."

In addition to these smaller improvements, Cirello also has big plans for 2022. In September of 2020, he purchased the former Gus' Steakhouse and will be converting it into Dickey's Barbecue Pit, a restaurant chain based in Dallas, Texas.

"Well, right now I'm completely focused on [Dickey's

Barbecue Pit]. So for 2022, getting that up and opened," he said. "We started construction about the week of Thanksgiving. So we're coming along nicely down there."

Work on the new establishment is still ongoing, but Cirello said he's expecting it to be finished and ready for business around May of this year.

The ever-popular Park Place Idol will also be returning in 2022, after being put on hold in 2021 due to the pandemic. The three-week

event begins in February, and is open to residents of all ages.

"We are planning to do a Park Place Idol this February. So last year we didn't do that," said Cirello. "They sing while we put them on every TV. We put a camera on them, and all the families come. Usually every one of our tables are reserved days before that happens, because they all want to see their niece, or their granddaughter, or their son."

The pandemic may not have been easy, but Cirello made it through. He expressed his gratefulness to have gotten out unscathed, but recognized others have not been so fortunate.

"I'm just happy we're here. And I feel sorry, you know, we've been in business for a long time, and some of these people have been in business for a long time. The small places I'm sure are getting crushed. And a lot of them didn't make it, which is really unfortunate," said Cirello. "This is everybody's livelihoods, they put their lives into them. And it would just be, I know to me, devastating if I lost everything I had after so many years."

The Ontario

Nestled on West Midland Drive is The Ontario, a family-run restaurant and bar that is a true COVID success story. Thanks to the dedication of staff members and the loyalty of customers, The Ontario stood strong in the face of the pandemic.

"I want to say, because my

customers stuck with me and ... we were so supported by our staff and customers, that we made it through," said owner Cynthia Thompson. "I had some stay on when they could've gotten that \$900. When I got the PPP loans, I paid them that."

The Ontario has served the Norwich area for over 120 years, and was bought by Thompson's husband in 1983. Around 22 years ago, Thompson took over operations and has kept the restaurant running ever since.

Currently, The Ontario is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. from Monday through Saturday, and from 12 p.m. to 6 p.m. on Sundays. The establishment focuses on lunch and dinner, such as sandwiches, seafood, pasta dishes, and more, and also offers a full bar.

Like all other restaurants, The Ontario had to make some adjustments throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Thompson said they were minimal, and ultimately didn't cause too much hardship.

"We had to gear more to take-outs during the pandemic, and I kept as much of the staff on as I could through. We never had to close down," she said, adding that food shortages didn't pose too much of a challenge either. "I didn't have too bad. I mean, there were sometimes things we couldn't get, but I really was very fortunate."

The Chenango County Health Department also offered support throughout the pandemic by keeping Thompson informed on current guidelines and answering her questions.

"We worked very closely with the health department, they were always available for my questions. Isaiah [Sutton]'s a good guy over there, he's great. But I would just say they were very helpful with the guidelines," said Thompson. "I'd reach out, they were always available to me."

Ultimately, Thompson said her only concerns over the past two years were in regard to her staff catching the virus, or being forced to close the doors to The Ontario. But, she said those fears seem to have passed as business is getting back to normal.

"Just, you know, my staff getting ill, or having to close

down. But like I said, even when we had to close down we could still serve to-go," she explained. "Now I'd say that we have recovered from that, and that we're doing as well as we had done prior to the pandemic. We are. Isn't that great?"

The Ontario staff were even able to keep their summertime chicken barbecues going, something that Thompson said Norwich residents absolutely love.

"The one thing that we're kind of famous for are our chicken barbecues that we do. They're very popular," said Thompson. "We don't have certain dates for them, but in the summer we do them, you know, try to do them once a month. We usually sell out; People love our barbecue chicken."

Ultimately, Thompson credits her restaurant's survival of the pandemic to both her staff and customers.

"We're grateful that we made it through this, and like I said, all due to my customers and staff. I sure don't take any credit for it," she said. "It was hard, but we did it, and only because of my staff. I had just a wonderful staff and customers."

The support and patronage of Chenango County residents is what kept restaurants standing during the challenges of COVID-19. Former City of Norwich Mayor Shawn Sastri said watching the community come together to keep their favorite eateries around was nothing short of remarkable.

"The first thing that comes to my mind is the amount of support people show. Especially during COVID, I was just amazed at how everyone was able to support a lot of the businesses downtown," he said. "That's what I love about Norwich, it's a come-together community."

The pandemic may not be over, but the area is stronger together. Through continued and mutual assistance, the City of Norwich and its restaurants can weather any storm to come.

"I love my customers," said Thompson, reminiscing on her memories as a business owner. "The friendships I've made, I would say that that's what I treasure the most. Meeting people, and your customers become your family, too."



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Commerce Chenango tackles big projects in 2021, major plans for 2022 —

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Emergency Services, and our local legislators, and the state officials, and really was kind of on the ground level of what was happening with the state as things were unfolding," she said.

In terms of operations at Commerce Chenango, the organization had to adapt and expand in order to offer the best support and services to the community that they could. Green said this also helped put the agency on the radar, which made them more visible and accessible to area businesses.

"I would say COVID, for Commerce Chenango as a whole and all of the organizations, really helped put us in the center of what was happening with the state and with local officials, and really made us the go to place for businesses, for resources and help and information," said Green. "We sort of saw an opening, and were able to take that and turn it into something that was really worthwhile for the community. I feel like it really changed our overall image, and the face of everything that we really do."

While Commerce Chenango has always served as a resource for local businesses, their services became even more crucial while the area was in the throes of COVID-19. Green said the agency implemented new



Commerce Chenango President and CEO Kerri Green speaking with Assemblyman John Lemondes at the 2021 Commerce Chenango Gala. (Submitted photo)

resources for business owners, such as webinars, assisting them with business certification, and supporting them through the "phase in" process as restrictions lifted.

"We helped over 500 businesses in a six month period. And not just people from Chenango County, Chenango County and beyond, because we were just as visible and out there as possible," said Green.

At the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, Green had only been a part of Commerce Chenango for around six months. Despite being new to the leadership

role, she didn't shy away from the challenges. Rather, Green took action and did everything she could to help local businesses, according to Commerce Chenango Finance Committee Member and Development Chenango Corporation (DCC) Vice Chair Mary Branham.

"Not even gotten a year under her belt, and she's handling COVID. And I have to say, and I know many board members will say the same thing, that she reacted amazingly," said Branham. She was quick to get resources to people as quickly as she could, [and] came to us as

a board on how can we do things to help."

Green said she focused on helping members of the community get through the difficulties of the last two years simply because it was the right thing to do.

"People were scared, and they didn't know what to do and where to go," Green explained. "It's a really, really proud time for me to be able to say that we were able to help people the way that we were."

"It wasn't just about businesses, it wasn't about membership, it wasn't about any of that. It was just about

doing the right thing," she added. "I give a lot of credit to all of the boards under Commerce because I said to them, listen, we just need to do something because it's the right thing to do. When we were doing webinars, it wasn't just for members, it was for anybody and everybody, and they agreed 100 percent. They're like, just do what needs to be done. And that was really wonderful."

The assistance from Commerce Chenango went beyond local business as well. Green recalled an instance where an individual called the organization asking for help, and Commerce Chenango was able to provide the resources she needed.

"I remember the calls I took, the calls were just non-stop. And it was good because it meant that our message was getting out there and people were using us as a resource," she said. "Even just individuals. I mean, I remember a call I got from a woman, she was like, 'I'm quarantined, I need to get food for my kids, what do I do?' Just so upset and distraught. So I think I ended up calling United Way and figuring out how to do a food thing for her."

Thanks to the hard work of the Finance Committee, Commerce Chenango was also able to provide over \$650,000 in loans to local businesses.

"We did some loans, because the PPP loans were

shut down so fast, and people still needed help. And so we even helped out a few businesses in the community that needed something just to get by," said Branham. "We were pretty proud of that, on the Finance Committee ... That was a proud moment, being able to help our businesses stay afloat."

In addition to expanding their services, Commerce Chenango also had to make adjustments to their regular operations to accommodate COVID-19. Green said in-person events weren't possible so switching to virtual was a must, planning difficulties arose due to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, and the agency had to create backup plans to allow for possible reinstatement of COVID restrictions.

"Our entire organization just had to shift," said Green. "We knew we weren't going to have events, we weren't going to do in-person events. We just we had to rethink how we were going to bring in revenue. It takes money to do some of the things that we do, and we had to really think about it a little bit."

Additionally, with the time saved by not having multiple in-person events, Commerce Chenango was able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, and find ways to better serve the communi-

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ty. This introspection led to a marketing campaign, rebranding, and a new website.

"We really took some time to look at our organization internally and see, okay, what do we do well, what don't we do well. You know, we have this extra time now because we weren't having events after events," Green explained. "So we did a whole marketing campaign, we rebranded ourselves, we did a new website. So we tried to take that advice of, you know, let's take this time since we're not running around and we're not doing this stuff that we're normally are doing. Let's take care of those things that we really need to focus on."

According to Branham, this created a very busy year for the organization. But, she said the changes and new ideas fueled the board members, and made them excited about the future.

"Kerri [Green] has been so busy bringing in new ideas and promoting what Commerce has to offer, that she's kept us busy. And this would've happened with or without COVID," Branham said. "I feel like our boards, we're all rejuvenated and excited about ideas, and making things happen, and watching people in the community start their new businesses."

Community coming together

Ultimately, while the pan-

demid had a massive impact on local businesses, and Commerce Chenango, Green said it was a great display of how the Chenango County community takes care of each other.

"Probably the one biggest thing that sticks out in my mind for Chenango County is how big of a heart it has," she said. "It doesn't matter what tragedy it is, or what is going on, the community always comes together. To raise money, to do food drives, to give clothing."

Last Christmas, Commerce Chenango held a food distribution event at SUNY Morrisville. Due to the community's giving nature, Green said the agency had no trouble finding volunteers to help with the event.

"We had no problem getting volunteers. And anytime there's a cry for help, the communities always come together to help. To help their own and to help each other," she explained. "I think that is something really special that you can see throughout the entire county."

Another way Commerce Chenango helped the community was through their Fueling the Frontline program. According to Green, the organization raised \$10,000 to provide meals to frontline workers, and support local restaurants, on two occasions.

"We provided meals to all of the shifts at the hospital, all of the clinics in the county, emergency services, the

police at one point," she said. "And we [did] that by getting donations, and then we used local restaurants to actually fill it. So we were able to help the restaurant industry as well by giving them a little bit."

But, in a heartfelt gesture indicative of the spirit of Chenango County, Green said many local restaurants wanted to donate the meals, as a way of contributing to the efforts of Commerce Chenango and giving back to frontline workers.

"It sort of backfired. We did this to try to help people and help the businesses, but then the restaurants that were participating just wanted to do something to help frontline workers. So they were like, oh we'll donate it. And I'm like, no no no, we want to pay you," said Green. "So people were like, okay just pay me for costs or we'll match it or something."

"So we ended up with so much leftover money because of how generous these business owners were. We were able to continue the program, and that was just amazing."

Reflecting on how supportive the community is, Green said it extends not only to individuals, but local businesses as well.

"I think something like that, you can see that in the businesses too," she said. "We're made up of a lot of small businesses, we're made up of a lot of small business owners, everybody knows each other. They're there to

help each other out if you need something, and it's something that makes us very special and unique, despite how large our county is."

Branham agreed, and added, "I think we can say that even in bad times, we all came together to help each other. Because we've never experienced anything like this."

DRI Grant

In addition to all the developments and pro-

grams Commerce Chenango saw in the last two years, the organization also pulled off a massive win for the Norwich community: a \$10 million dollar Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) grant awarded by the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council (STREDC).

about April of 2020 we realized that they were not doing the DRI for obvious reasons," Green explained. "So we put a halt to everything, but we had really done a lot of our research, a lot of our starting to look at those bigger projects in that four or five month time."

"We didn't know if they were going to be opening it back up again, if we were going to be able to apply," she added. "WYou know, we had that sort of in the back of our head when we were working on other projects."

Work on the application began once again in the summer, after Green heard STREDC would begin accepting them again sometime

soon.

"We worked very hard very quickly to pull our application together, gather letters of support, you know, take a look at what we've done previously and say, okay, has anything changed since COVID, has anything changed in the last year that we need to be including in this application, and we brought it to fruition from there," she said.

Their hard work paid off, and the City of Norwich was awarded the DRI grant in December of 2021. Now, the work of implementing the improvements outlined in the application begins.

"My concern now is, let's get this \$10 million invested in a good way, and let's do something awesome for Norwich," said Green. "I know in the future that's going to take a big amount of my time and focus. So getting my staff up to where they need to be, trained-wise, so they can continue to move forward while my attention is going to be diverted to other things for a while."

The winning application consists of 89 pages of color photos, past investments in the city, words of support from community members, and details the "transformative opportunities" that Commerce Chenango plans to address with the grant money.

The transformative opportunities include establishing a business and workforce training center, creation

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of a micro-retail space, creating improved accessibility and safety to upper floors of downtown buildings, development of arts in the park and maker-space concepts, transformation of Norwich's central green space into an access point and connection to local attractions, and the conversion of walkways and common areas into welcoming and accessible areas.

Additionally, local business owners will also have the opportunity to apply for grants from the DRI funding, to help support and revitalize their own businesses in the downtown area.

The full details of each transformative opportunity can be found on the Commerce Chenango website, commercechenango.com, under the "Downtown Revitalization Initiative" tab. Other information and communications about the DRI grant can also be found on the site.

"Our plan is that the city and the county will all link to it. So as far as any communication when the DRI comes out, it's going to be coming out of our office," Green explained. "There will be a link to the application, a list of sort of the six transformative opportunities that we've talked about, when we're going to have public meetings, when people can actually start applying for the funds. All of that will be on that website, so people can go there for more information."

The Local Planning Committee, made up of municipal representatives, community leaders, and stakeholders, and co-chaired by Green and City of Norwich Mayor Brian Doliver, is

"There's a lot to be said for Chenango County and what we have to offer, and I think we're unique. I think it's sort of a niche area in the state," said Green. "We've certainly shown them why we're on the map and what makes us special, and that we are viable and innovative, and ready for change and growing."

also working on a Strategic Investment Plan.

The plan will explore opportunities and assets in the area, and identify any economic development, transportation, housing, and community projects that would benefit from revitalization efforts.

"It's a three-year strategic plan that we're in the final stages of doing. We've been working on that since about June. So we're going to be unveiling that to the community, to our boards, to the businesses. We're doing a bit of a road show with it coming here in the next couple of months, as soon as it's safe to do so. We'll do it virtually as well," said Green. "So we're really excited about that, that was a lot of work. And that will really help guide is in the future about where we spend our time and our energy."

Green said a large reason this process was a success

is due to the viability of the area, and the dedication of those working to improve it.

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"I think that's apparent, and part of the reason why we won the DRI is because we were able to show that," she continued. "You know, they wouldn't have invested \$10 million into our communities if they didn't think that we were going to turn it into something."

Other developments and future plans

In addition to the DRI project, Commerce Chenango had some other exciting developments in 2021.

In August, the DCC purchased 14-16 South Broad Street, which formerly housed the SUNY Morrisville Norwich campus. The building is slated to be transformed into a 45-room bou-

tique hotel, complete with a restaurant and meeting area. Ideally, the project will be completed by 2023.

Commerce Chenango also continued their support of local businesses through DCC loans, meant to help businesses stay afloat and recover after the pandemic. A loan was also provided to the Chenango Greenway Conservancy, to assist with developments of the stone quarry property, which they purchased in December of 2021.

"We just approved a loan, sort of line of credit sort of loan, for the Chenango Greenway to help them with their final stages of what they need," Green explained. "They've already purchased the property, but there's some things they're going to have to do to the property this spring. So the board allocated an amount of funds to help with that."

The DCC has also provided loans to Jerry's Inn in Bainbridge, Forged Brewing Company in Coventry, and Bella Bella Salon in Norwich, among others. In total, the agency has invested over \$1 million in Chenango County since the summer of 2019.

"Between purchasing the building that we purchased for the future hotel project, and with the loans, we've given out over \$650,000 worth of loans. So right there is over \$1 million of investment that we've made into the county since I took over," said Green.

As Vice Chair of DCC,

Branham said this is something she would like to continue; helping these businesses, whether established or new, however they can.

"You just don't know who's the next business that's going to open or what idea is going to come up," said Branham. "I would like to be able to say that we just are continuing on the path of helping businesses, and giving people opportunities that will help them grow, and help our community grow."

"We really do have a great group of people that are all in it for the greater good, to help others," she added, speaking of the other board members.

Moving forward, Commerce Chenango is planning to continue their efforts on the DRI projects, as well as continuing to support local businesses that were impacted by the pandemic.

"I'm really just trying to find a way to help businesses rebound," Green said. "Just keep doing the good work that we're doing, finding ways to continue to grow and expand, and be a resource for Chenango County, for the businesses, [and] for the community."

She also hopes to continue events hosted by Commerce Chenango, such as the Legislative Breakfast, which serves as an opportunity for community members to meet and speak with elected officials.

"Something we started that we were able to actually pull off twice now, which I'm pretty proud of, is the

Legislative Breakfast," Green said. "It's just been a great way for business owners and community members to come and have face to face time with their elected officials. So more things that we can do like that is always positive."

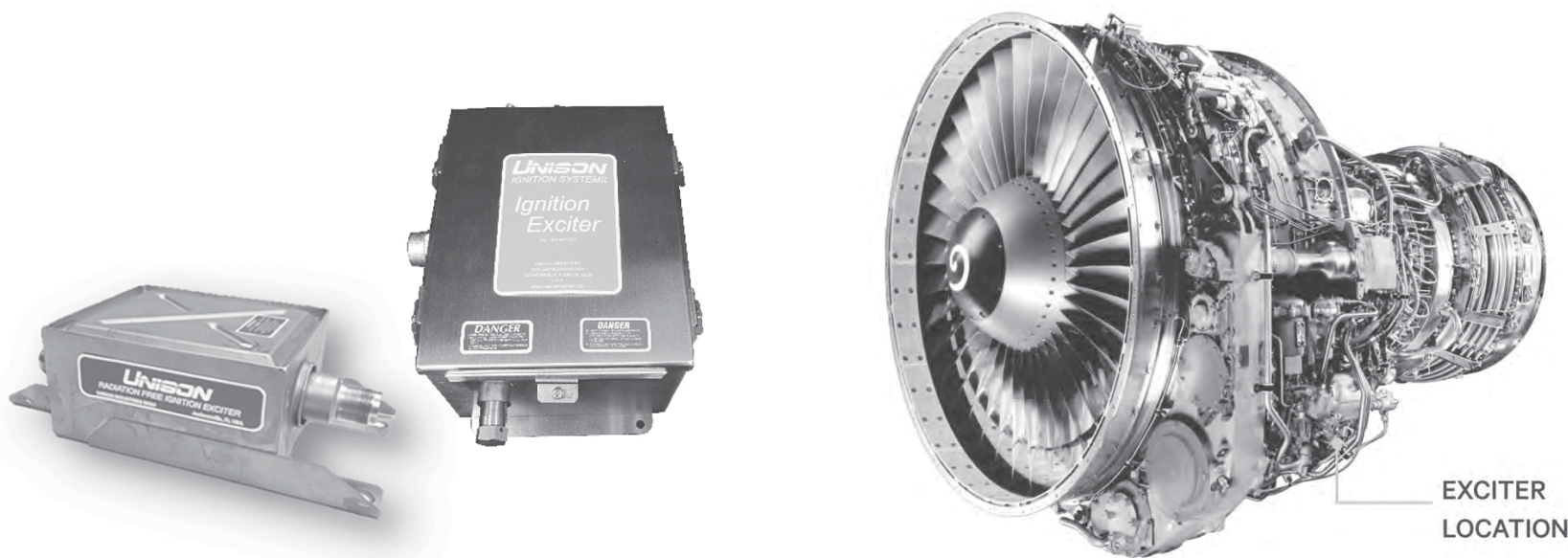
While the organization has seen a lot of positive changes in the past two years, Green said she would like things to calm a bit, to allow for better focus on current projects.

"It would be great to have a year of not having a ton of change. I mean, I don't mind change, obviously. In two years we've gone through a ton of it. But I would kind of like a regular year," she said. "I just would sort of like to just get back to business a little bit without a lot of twists and turns."

But, overall, Commerce Chenango will continue to invest in the community, help entrepreneurs get started, and support local businesses, which is what they do best.

"We try to be that resource for people. I mean, people come to us sometimes and it's just an idea and they don't know where to start. Other people, maybe they've started a business plan but they're not sure what to do next," said Green. "We really help them from every step of the way, no matter where they are in the process. We can help them with their business idea and get them going."

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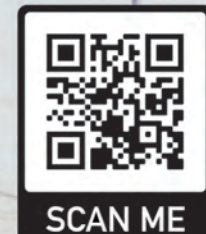


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