**Commerce Chenango: The county's top business advocacy organization works to Move Chenango Forward**

The staff of Commerce Chenango. From left, Joanna Cacciola, Economic Development and Grant Writing; Megan Brennan, Administrative Assistant and Program Aid; Kerri Green, President & CEO; Mary Miner, Director of Membership & Programs; and Audrey Robinson, Director of Communications and Tourism.

**BY MELISSA STAGNARO**

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**NORWICH**

Commerce Chenango President and CEO Kerri Green had big plans for 2020. It would be Green's first full year as head of Chenango's largest business advocacy organization, and she had set lofty goals for herself and her growing team.

"I remember the Economic Outlook Breakfast, and talking with our attendees about all the wonderful things we were going to do and how excited we were to get started," she said, recalling the February 2020 event at Canasawacta Country Club in Norwich.

According to Green, those plans included initiatives around workforce development, childcare, lodging and rural broadband. She was also keen to rebrand the organization; she'd taken the helm of her predecessor Steve Craig.

"Had we been 'business as usual' we would have hit the ground running that spring with event after event, networking, programs, visiting businesses, training workshops, visiting businesses and much more," she said. "Instead, barely two weeks later, she and her team were forced to shift their energy and focus as the public health crisis posed by the spread of COVID-19 took center stage. As a former small business owner herself, Green was keenly aware of the threat this posed to businesses and control the move-ment of goods through a company.

Speaking of the pandemic Raymond CEO and President Michael Field said, "It has really re-inforced what’s important to all of us, and how the small things in life are the most valuable to us. But from a corporate perspective, I think it really helps you understand how important the contributions of your people are, and the level of leadership from people that you didn’t necessarily think it really helps you..."

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**BY TYLER MURPHY**

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**GREENE - Raymond certainly faced challenges in 2020, dealing with changes in production, supply and a handful of employees falling ill.**

Overall, the company performed very well mostly due to the fact they have always invested in cutting edge technology in order to remain competitive in their international material handling market.

Before the pandemic one of Raymond’s strengths was developing advanced fork trucks, including those powered by hydrogen fuel cells or lithium ion batteries, but just as significant are the computer programs they created that monitor, process and control the movement of goods through a company.

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**Raymond: Investing in the future was the best way to overcome COVID**

**BY ZACHARY MESECK**

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**CHENANGO COUNTY - Greater Opportunities for Broome and Chenango Incorporated, previously known as Opportunities For Chenango (OFC) went through some major changes in 2020, most importantly their merger with the former Opportunities for Broome in July.**

According to Greater Opportunities Deputy Director Kelly Robertson, "The former OFB and OFC were both community action agencies, and merged into Greater Opportunities for Broome and Chenango Incorporated because we wanted to provide more comprehensive services to the people of both communities" said Robertson. "We wanted to make sure we were taking two strong agencies to make an even stronger one, and fortunately that’s what we did."

Robertson said the merger has been in the works for approximately three years, and that the process was made even more difficult by the coronavirus.

"The merger was in the works far before COVID-19, and the fact that we were able to accomplish it even with COVID is great," she said. "We were able to keep our services going during the pandemic by transitioning everything to a virtual format."

"Unfortunately, we did have to temporarily close our Head Start Centers and Main Offices to the public for a period of time during the start of the pandemic, but we never closed for services as we were still able to provide services virtually. In May, we were able to re-open our offices to the public."

She added that the coronavirus forced Greater Opportunities to take on a unique perspective on education, and the creation of a new phone application was part of their plan to help feel the void.

"Starting this year, individuals can download..."
Chenango businesses. She was determined to ensure her organization was in a position to help— as an advocate and as a resource— for businesses and organizations across the county.

“Throughout the spring and summer, we hosted over 15 webinars, many in collaboration with our county officials and with state representation,” she said. Those events were open to not just Commerce Chenango members, but any business or community member that could benefit from the information shared.

She and her team also counseled individual business owners and non-profits on funding opportunities, evolving state guidelines, the re-opening certification process and more.

In addition, they used their role as an advocacy organization to ensure that the voice of Chenango businesses was heard on the local, state, regional and federal levels.

“Commerce Chenango was uniquely poised to be a liaison between the state, the Chenango County legislature, Chenango County Department of Health and Emergency Services,” she explained. “We also served as the Chenango County representative in the Southern Tier Control Room and communicated daily with all Chenango County agencies on what was happening at the state.”

Ensuring Commerce Chenango’s ability to meet both the public health and potential economic impact of the pandemic required the forging of new partnerships, increased communication and trust.

“Collaboration is key in times like these. I am extremely proud of how we came together as a county, region and state,” Green said. Commerce Chenango found other ways to be of service, as well. Perhaps the highest profile of those efforts was the Fueling the Frontline program. More than $10,000 was raised through the Chenango Foundation to fund the initiative, which provided meals from local restaurants to health care workers and emergency responders across the county. It was coordinated by Commerce Chenango’s Director of Member & Programs Mary Miner, and helped both the struggling restaurant industry as well as showed appreciation for those working on the front lines against COVID-19.

“Fueling the Frontline was an amazing and humbling opportunity to give back to Chenango County in a meaningful way,” Green said. “We felt like we were making a difference and showing our appreciation during a dark time.”

One piece of advice Green gave to business and non-profit leaders often in the spring and summer of 2020 was to use the opportunity presented by the pause in “business as usual” to look at their business model, budget, staffing and marketing.

“I felt it was important for businesses to take a step back and take a look at their organization as a whole,” she said. “When will we ever have this opportunity again to slow down; really look at our mission, operations and (business) model; and make changes?”

Green took her own advice and applied it to Commerce Chenango.

“It gave us time to think, as a team, about how we could do more for the businesses and overall economic future of Chenango County,” she said. “I had the opportunity to really look at our organization from the ground up to see where we did well and where we had gaps.”

One important result of that discovery process was a clearer sense of identity for Commerce Chenango, which serves as not just a chamber, but also an umbrella for Development Chenango Corporation, the Chenango County Industrial Development Agency, and the Chenango Foundation.

“Commerce Chenango is more than a Chamber of Commerce. We are the economic development arm of Chenango County. We work with businesses, developers, and our county, state and federal partners to advocate for progress in Chenango County,” Green explained. “We are poised to face any challenge, advocate for the needs of the county and we are always looking for opportunities to add to the local economy.”

She is particularly proud of the new branding she and her team developed around the organization’s purpose and mission.

“I love our new logo and website. Not only

**Blueox Energy**

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**FEBRUARY 10, 2021**

*Commerce Chenango: How our county’s top business advocacy organization is working to Move Chenango Forward —*

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yet in the rear-view mirror, Green and her team’s eyes are firmly on the future. What does that mean for Chenango County? According to Green, their top priorities include broadband access for all of Chenango County; increasing access to childcare; connecting businesses and organizations with grant and other funding opportunities; increasing access to childcare; connecting businesses and organizations with grant and other funding opportunities; creating an attractive portfolio of Chenango County to attract industries; and community each year.

“From the General Clinton Canoe Regatta, to the Antique Rollers, Colorscape Chenango, Music in the Park, the Chenango Blues Festival, Classic Car Cruise-ins and so many other outdoor fes-
tivals, events, street fairs and concerts, tourism is a powerful part of what makes Chenango County special,” Green said.

Many of these festivals and events are still in limbo for 2022, and she said she worries about how that will impact not only the events themselves but other businesses that rely on the visitors they drew – including lodging, restaur-
ants, retail and more.

“A question that needs to be considered is, ‘How can Chenango County position itself to have a successful, even if lighter, tourism season this spring, summer and fall?’”

While the lingering effects of COVID will no doubt present challenges across industries, it has also helped Green see new opportunity in what some might consider Chenango’s oldest asset: the county’s rural geography.

“We are uniquely posi-
tioned to take advantage of those people and busi-
tnesses who no longer want to be in bigger cities,” she said.

Commerce Chenango’s new Economic Develop-
ment Assistant and Grant Writer, Joanna Caciola, has been tasked with updating Chenango County’s property profile on an online system called StateBook, which is used by developers and inves-
tors considering locations for future investment.

“Having a large portfo-
ilio of these available spac-
es will entice these devel-
opers to visit our coun-
ty,” Green said. “Once we get them here, I know we can sell the area – which means jobs, opportunities and local investment in our economy.”

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SUCCESS STORY

Weaver’s Farm Market

Thank you to all of our customers for all your support and friendship throughout 2020. It was a challenging year with COVID but also a year of many blessings. 2020 was our second year in our new Farm Market. Sales were a lot higher than expected with more customers and higher sales per customer. We give God the honor and give credit to you our customers and suppliers.

You will find a large selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. We source as much local pro-
ducts and eggs which also includes local farms and processors Stoltzfus Dairy (Vernon Dairy), Cowdellia Dairy (Jefferson), Krinemaid Dairy (Hamilton), Cooperstown Cheese (Cooperstown), West Meadow Farm (Johnstown), John’s Gouda (Deanboro), our newest local dairy is Clark Farms Creamery (Delhi) and Gilligan’s Ice Cream (Sherburne). We also stock Byrne Dairy products amongst others.

You will enjoy our fresh baked goods from seven local bakers. If you are looking for artisan sourdough breads your choice will be Heather’s Artisan breads from Gilbertsville. Stop in Saturday mornings and treat yourself to Heather’s old world pastries. We also will find a large selection of Amish baked goods plus hard to find homemade Irish soda bread from our bakers in Otsego. You will find a large selection of gluten free, chemical free, sugar free and organic in our natural section and throughout the store. Most of our produce is organic or chemical free. You will enjoy our unique display of local honey and maple syrup, sugar and candies.

We have a great selection of deli meats and cheeses. Our #1 seller in the deli is John F. Martin and Sons because most of our Deli meats and cheese come from the Antique Rollers, garden, goose, duck, guinea, and rabbit. Other items include frozen seafood, Thai foods amongst many other grocery items.

We specialize in many local items we source from around for local farmers, bak-
ers and crafters. Local to us is Otsego County and the adjoining counties. You will find a large selection of fresh fruits and vegetables. We source as much local pro-
ducts and eggs which also includes local farms and processors Stoltzfus Dairy (Vernon Dairy), Cowdellia Dairy (Jefferson), Krinemaid Dairy (Hamilton), Cooperstown Cheese (Cooperstown), West Meadow Farm (Johnstown), John’s Gouda (Deanboro), our newest local dairy is Clark Farms Creamery (Delhi) and Gilligan’s Ice Cream (Sherburne). We also stock Byrne Dairy products amongst others.

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Talking about candies come browse through our large selection of bulk candies including sugar free.

For those of you who enjoy baking you will enjoy our kitchen and baking wares section.

Talking about baking we have a large selection of bulk baking supplies to choose from including spices, nuts, dried fruits and vegetables, soup mixes, dip mixes and much more to choose from.

You will appreciate our local crafts and furniture and many other items.

For those of you who have not been at our market we invite you to come and explore for yourself all of these items. We want to thank you for supporting local. Our family and staff enjoy taking care of your wants and needs. We look forward to seeing you,

- The Daniel Weaver Family and Staff at Weaver’s Farm Market
Raymond: Investing in the future was the best way to overcome COVID—Continued from Page 29

Field has worked for Raymond for 19 years, the company will celebrate its 100th anniversary in August, and Field has been flexible. The company declared an essential business and has been productive during the pandemic.

"When we decided that we were going to keep the factory running, the priority was that we were going to keep the people who could work remotely do that, so we made the decision and within 48 hours we had 700 people working from home. Our IT organization set up a network, supported our employees, and we did this almost flawlessly. It was again, people standing up and figuring out how to do things that we had never considered before."

Field also said it was hard to adapt to the unknown and the fast-changing expectations at the onset of the pandemic.

"In a short period of time — I think that our culture around continuous improvement and management practices helped drive this, particularly developing standard work — we had specific standard work that was structured for everything from cleaning the inside of the facility, to what density we would have in the building, how conference rooms would be structured, temperature taking at the doors, etc. Because we have a good infrastructure and strong manufacturing engine, we were able to put those in place very quickly."

In putting these new processes in place Field explained he and the company were reminded of just how important investing in internal resources and employees really is. He said before Raymond began looking outward it took a long, hard look at its internal teams and systems to make sure they were the best they could be.

"Our people were exceptional. As I look back, it’s really incredible to me how few problems we had. We really focused on communication, education, understanding, retraining. Explaining why were doing things, but the major strength of our workforce understood what we were doing was important, that we are really important to the economy, and it kind of gave us something to fight for. And I think people have pride in that, and it made people go above and beyond their performance to get the job done," he said.

Contrary to another trend, instead of laying-off workers during the pandemic Raymond has sought to continue to hire employees.

"At this point, one of our biggest challenges has been the need to hire additional staffing to support our buys. So, we’ve had hiring going on the entire year.”

"The company had to get creative, holding drive-thru career fairs and other non-traditional and often virtual, recruiting programs. Raymond has more staff now than it did a year ago, adding about 75 more staff to our management committees.

Field said those three steps working together, anticipate you would see it from the company."
Field said that Raymond, a company worked towards making more connections, processing more data and information, and focused on increased automation, all of which generated and more profitable due to the pandemic.

“I do think that, post-pandemic, we will come out as we are now, a stronger organization, and I think that our long-term customers are seeing us as more of a solutions and technology partner rather than just a truck provider,” said Field. Raymond worked to find opportunity in the crisis by providing solutions to other companies struggling with the fallout from the pandemic. They continued to launch new products as customers’ demand for both fork trucks and technical support grew.

“Customers are looking for more technology because they recognize the environment that they’re in with COVID being a risk to them and with shortage of labor. So, we brought more new automation products to market that we’re very proud of,” said Field. Raymond Energy Essential was one of those offerings. The company launched a new lithium ion set of batteries for fork trucks. Seen as the next generation of power, they provide a number of advantages over traditional lead acid batteries for fork trucks. Raymond produced more than 2,500 face shields to support local communities and essential workers including health care and first responders.

Raymond services very well. It has also generated strengthed e-commerce, and with the quality of people we’re tremendously blessed. Raymond decided to work in the next six months. They’re indicating that their customers actually feel good about the future,” he said.

“I think a part of that is the vaccine, they’re optimistic, they’re looking to spend money and they’re looking to invest to be more efficient. And that’s where our products and our expertise around lean management helps to support that.”

Help the community, help your families
Field said Raymond is in regular contact with the Chenango Department of Health and participates in a weekly call with local organizations and the hospitals. “We’ve had a strong partnership with UHS where they are monitoring any Raymond associate who has any type of symptoms – we have a medical provider talk to the individual to make sure that they’re getting whatever resources they need,” he said.

“I don’t think we can thank them enough for the level of support that they have provided to Raymond, and more importantly to the entire community. They’re really the heroes in this whole process.”

In a normal year Raymond and their employees support a number of community events and charities and the company remained committed to that. Since most fund-raising events were canceled, Raymond decided to reach out and donated more.

“We continued to support all of the organizations that we did in the past and also we made an initiative and his capability, is that we love the feel of being in Greene. But at the same time, we’re part of this global organization, so we really try to take the best of both worlds and we feel fortunate to have that.”
Opportunities for Chenango transforms into Greater Opportunities during the pandemic —

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the Greater Opportunities app to see what services are available, receive notices from the agency, and apply for services,” said Robertson. “It’s another way for us to communicate with our clientele and our community.”

Robertson said the Greater Opportunities phone application took about six months to develop, and it will allow people to check on available programs along with a variety of other functions.

In addition to the phone application, the organization has also continued to write for grant funding and provide services, along with the total rebrand and new website.

“We wanted to make sure that both communities understood that the services we provide would continue, and that we would be able to expand on our services with the merger,” Robertson said. “We know people were worried about the merger, and we heard concerns that Greater Opportunities would not provide our current programs and services to both Broome and Chenango.”

“The combination of the two agencies increases our ability to provide services, and it also makes it so people have more options for where they receive services.”

For people living in Greene, it might be easier for them to go to the Broome County Office instead of the Norwich Office. She added that with their combined resources, Greater Opportunities can provide a continuum of services to their clientele.

“Within one agency, we can now take an individual from homelessness to homeownership through our variety of programs,” Robertson said.

“That’s one of the huge benefits of the merge, and we’re happy that it was able to happen despite the pandemic.”

Robertson added Greater Opportunities was fortunate that it didn’t have to make staffing cuts, and it only had to close for a limited amount of time while still providing services remotely.

She said Opportunities for Chenango had grown a considerable amount in the past five years, expanding the services offered even before the merger.

“We’re fortunate to have been able to work with our communities and identify their needs and what kinds of programs they’d like to see, before and during the pandemic,” she added. “For example in our Head Start programs, a lot of parents were having trouble with the children not falling asleep at night. So the Head Start staff developed the Pajama Program, which provided parents with resources and skills need to develop a healthy bedtime routine with their child.”

Listening to the needs for the community and responding to those needs is at the core of Greater Opportunities’ mission.

“We’re definitely listening, we’re definitely trying to meet the community where it is, and we’re looking in ways to help meet that need,” said Robertson. “We have a wonderful working relationship with local government and other community agencies. We work in conjunction with them to collaboratively serve the people in our community.”

Robertson said working collaboratively with other nonprofits, and knowing where to refer clients in need was also a huge part of helping others during the pandemic. She said looking at all of the needs of a person is vital when trying to help them through a crisis.

“Non-profit agencies have to work together in order to serve a client holistically and meet the client where they are,” she added. “For instance, we’re not experts in banking, so we’re going to try and take on banking; so we’re going to refer them to local banks.”

“There’s no need to repeat what another group is already doing, it’s working collaboratively to make sure the client gets what they need.”

She said while the merger did have several benefits, the major challenge for staff was the considerable increase in size of the agency and working within a two-county region.

“I think in the beginning people worried that everything would change here that we would move everything to Broome,” said Robertson. “We still have the same services in both counties, and all of our programs are going forward as usual.”
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