Chenango County’s new chairman looks ahead and is not afraid to answer tough questions

BY ZACHARY MESECK
Evening Sun Reporter
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As Chenango County heads into 2021, the pandemic dominates daily life, including the economy and almost all government functions.

Even democratic principles have taken a backseat to New York State’s response to the pandemic, with the state being essentially ruled by a single branch of government through executive orders issued by Governor Andrew Cuomo for most of 2020.

Nursing homes in particular have been devastated as New York State has botched the initial vaccine distribution. About a third of the reported deaths in Chenango County at the end of January 2021 were from local nursing homes.

Chenango County and many rural areas have struggled to get vaccines. Under intense pressure the vaccination process is slowly picking up steam but health officials estimate optimistically it will be late summer or early fall before the vaccine brings enough relief to begin a return to normal life.

The county’s top priority for 2021

“The first priority, and it may be for a while, is dealing with COVID-19. COVID will continue to be a focus,” said newly appointed Chenango County Board of Supervisors Chairman George Seneck. He is the Town of Guilford supervisor.

“We are not where the state is saying we’re at. We’re not at B. I think you see stuff coming out of the governor’s office and it’s hard as a small county like this to get the information.”

While SFCU’s headquarters is located in Sidney, the credit union also has locations in Bainbridge, Greene, and Norwich. (Submitted photo)

Sidney Federal Credit Union expands during the pandemic

BY ZACHARY MESECK
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NORWICH — Sidney Federal Credit Union (SFCU) was able to make upgrades for its customers, keep team members safe, and break ground on a new branch in 2020.

According to Sidney Federal Credit Union Vice President of Marketing Keith May, 2020 was a year of progress for SFCU with a new ATM in the Price Chopper Plaza in the Town of Norwich, and the announcement for a new branch in Amsterdam New York.

As of early 2021, SFCU had 55,844 members, $607 Million in assets, and nine branches located in Sidney, Bainbridge, Greene, Norwich, Market St. Oneonta, Oneida St. Oneonta, Delhi, Walton, and Hancock with a 10th branch Amsterdam coming in later 2021.

May said while growth was important for SFCU, safety was at the top of their priority list with the pandemic looming throughout the year.

“In preparing for the pandemic our number one priority was the safety of our staff and members,” he said. “Deploying staff to remote positions and being able to provide them the equipment and resources was critical.”

“We also needed to ensure as staff were deployed to a remote work environment, we were able protect our members’ information, which was accomplished through multiple levels of required authentication, but also provide the high level of member experience our members are accustomed to.”

Nearly a year later, as the number of COVID-19 cases started to rise again, SFCU was able to pivot quickly to a hybrid model for administrative employees. With proper precautions and protocol in place they were able to

The Evening Sun
This paper will be the Friend of the Government, of Morals and Truth – Independent of Politics and Religion

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“This paper will be the Friend of the Government, of Morals and Truth – Independent of Politics and Religion.”

This was the creed of The Norwich Sun circa 1905, and though it may have fallen out of use, the basic premise remains the same.

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. Long before this publication, the newspaper business in Norwich saw its inception on Nov. 14, 1816 when J.F. Hubbard began publishing The Norwich Journal for 2 cents per 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 year 1893 marked the beginning of Chenango County’s first and only daily newspaper, still going strong today. The paper was first known as The Morning Sun, later becoming The Norwich Sun, and finally as it is known today, The Evening Sun.

The Morning Sun was first published on a daily basis by Reed Campbell on March 16, 1893 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 27 columns of display advertising.

In the editorial column of the very first Morning Sun, the following address was delivered by the editor:

“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 office has been equipped with new and modern presses, type, and everything necessary to make a first-class newspaper.

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The History of The Morning Sun

The year 1816 saw the inception of The Journal of Chenango County, the first newspaper to publish in the county.

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Sidney Federal Credit Union expands during the pandemic —

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leave branch lobbies open for members to continue to conduct business in person.

"Having the majority of staff working in a remote environment; most of whom have never worked in that kind of environment is probably the most relatable challenge we faced," May added. "Keeping staff focused and engaged, managers learning how to manage employees they cannot see face to face and keeping morale up during the long months of winter."

“Our team really rose to the occasion," May said SFCU used the Teams application to hold virtual meetings and have engaging events. He said the organization hosted a series of fun contests that employees could participate in and as the days warmed up remote employees made signs at home and visited their local branches to socially show support for SFCU’s invaluable group of frontline workers, our tellers and platform staff. "We are lucky to have nimble staff; they have become adapted to the changing landscape of our industry as a result COVID-19," he said.

"We have learned that with a challenging climate we were able to experience our online banking for business members, and these upgrades allowed for a tailored and more personalized business banking experience," said May. "Almost our commercial lending department was able to secure a SBA authorization to provide much needed PPP loans to our business members."

"We were able to make upgrades in our online banking for business members, and these upgrades allowed for a tailored and more personalized business banking experience," said May. "Also our commercial lending department was able to secure a SBA upgrade existing services and adding new ones."

"In 2020, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that our community who lost members and staff in their jobs will need help for many years to come."

"Business development for years to come, and they will need assistance, counseling, and support," said May. "Members of the community who lost their jobs will need help for years to come."

"The emotional impact of COVID-19 and all the friends and family lost forever be in the back of our minds and in our hearts."
SUCCESS STORY

Norwich Rehabilitation and Nursing Center

In a year marked by the greatest challenge their facility has ever seen as they strive to protect their residents from COVID-19, Norwich Rehabilitation and Nursing Center has found something to celebrate. Norwich Rehab was one of only five facilities in New York State awarded the American Health Care Association’s Silver Achievement in Quality Award. The award is given after an exhaustive review of a facility’s programs and outcomes that find their work is outstanding.

“Our project over the last few years has been to continue providing our long-term residents with the quality they both deserve and expect,” while developing the area’s premier short-term rehab program,” says facility administrator, Edith Revoir. “We want to be the destination for our community members to recover from surgeries or illnesses; their last step on their journey home. We can get them back to the community and back to their lives.” The outcomes express for themselves. While the national rate of return to the community from a sub acute skilled nursing stay is approximately 50%, Norwich Rehab’s success rate tops 80%. “One of the reasons I came to work here was the amazing work these therapists did with my grandfather. He was a tough customer, and I was really impressed that the team was able to get him back home. I want to be able to give other families in Chenango County the same gift that Norwich Rehab gave us—the gift of a loved one at home,” says Erika Swazy, Director of Admissions.

Norwich Rehab plans to continue their march towards excellence, developing more specialized rehabilitation programs in stroke and cardiac recovery, as well as launching an outpatient therapy program. They continue to implement restorative therapies to their residents on-in one-on-one settings, adapting their services to their resident’s needs in the face of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They count the sacrifices and dedication of their staff as key in their success in both their rehabilitation outcomes and COVID-19 prevention. “We have made it this far through hard work, strong leadership and a lot of luck,” accord to Swazy. “We’ve watched COVID tear through other facilities, and we recognize ‘there but for the grace...’” Norwich Rehab residents and employees have just completed their second round of vaccinations, and they are holding their collective breath that this is the first step. Edith Revoir says, “I’ve spent a year helping my residents connect with their loved ones via FaceTime and Zoom instead of hugs. It’s heart-breaking to watch their pain. I am so excited at the possibility that this vaccine could give them a chance to see their families again,” Allison Miller, Director of Social Services, expresses.

“We’re ready for a new year, a new start, and all the new steps we can take with our residents to improve their quality of life, whether it’s here with us or out in the community,” Revoir says. “We’re here to help. We’re excited to be a partner here in Chenango County and to take steps forward together.”

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S&S TV and Appliances Receives Dealer of the Year Award at BrandSource Convention Honored for commitment to excellence in the retail industry

DALLAS – S&S TV and Appliances of Norwich, N.Y., was named the BrandSource Dealer of the Year for the North Atlantic Region at the BrandSource National Convention & Expo at the Gaylord Texan in Dallas. Co-owners Tom and Joan Brunsler were honored at the buying group’s annual awards ceremony, which was held amid the hoopla of its four-day convention.

With showroom in Norwich and Hamilton, N.Y., S&S serves the great Madison and Chenango County communities with a wide selection of home appliances from such premium brands as Amana, Danby, Electrolux, Maytag, Monogram, Samsung and Whirlpool. The company also carries TVs and assorted A/V gear and accessories, and its specially trained, in-house technicians are prepared to service all that S&S sells.

The BrandSource Dealer of the Year awards are presented annually to a member who has shown continued support of BrandSource and its direct suppliers. The Dealer of the Year must support the group by attending regional meetings as well as national events such as the Convention and Summit.

The 14 winners, which were selected by each region’s membership, demonstrated a continued commitment to excellence in the retail industry and to their fellow BrandSource dealers.

About BrandSource: BrandSource is the leading merchandising organization for independent appliance, home furnishings and consumer tech dealers. Its parent company, AVB, is a $19.5 billion member-driven co-op that provides merchandising, financing and digital marketing services to nearly 5,000 independent dealers in the U.S. and Canada. BrandSource’s sister divisions and affiliates include ProSource (consumer tech and custom integration); TRIB Group (rent-to-own); Mega Group (Canada); and HFA Buying Source, serving home furnishings dealers nationwide.

S&S TV and Appliances also received the New York State Senate Empire Award that was presented by Senator Frederick J. Akshar II of the 52nd senate District. This award is in recognition of outstanding contributions and dedication to the growth, prosperity and betterment of their community in New York State.

S&S would also like to thank the community for making 2020 such a great success!
Chenango County’s new chairman looks ahead and is not afraid to answer tough questions

The official seal of Chenango County hangs in the board of supervisors meeting room at the Chenango County Office Building. (Photo by Tyler Murphy)

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“Still to my under-
standing, we still haven’t
decided whether to provide vac-
cines to all of our nursing
home people. I think that
is very important,” said
Seneck.

“So, we have that por-
tion of the population and
they are very vulnerable. I
think they’d be best served,
if they choose to want the
vaccine, to be able to have it.
We are months out. I really don’t
think that we’re going to be able
to service the population in
Chenango County, as far as
vaccine is concerned, well
into April or May.”

Until more vaccines are
available officials urged area residents to continue
to follow health guide-
lines, wear a mask, stay six
feet away from each other,
sanitize possible exposures
and practice a healthy life-
style.

How did the county first
respond to the pandemic?

In February board officials
began to understand that the COVID-19 virus
was going to have a significant impact, but informa-
tion was scarce and officials were left guessing on
what the reality might be.

County leaders were
unsure of how to respond and the Chenango County
Health Department run by Public Health Director
Marcus Flinth and the County Emergency
Management Services, headed by Emergency Services
Coordinator Matthew Beckwith, led Chenango County’s official
response to the pandemic, and they still do.

“The Chenango County
board of supervisors never
organized a unified response
to the pandemic or even had a meeting about how
to respond. They released almost no information
to the public. Over 2020 health officials did not come
to county board meetings, and the board did not ask
for regular updates or ask
from a few presented in
lower committees or made
individual supervisors.

In a coordinated effort,
Beckwith and Flinth began
offering information to the
public.

The health department had
Chenango County Medical Director Dr. Scott Cohen, who also works for the Basset Healthcare

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FEBRUARY 12, 2021

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Network, help organize
virtual weekly and bim-
onthly meetings. With the
help of Basset Health Care,
we provided regular informa-
tion to dozens of communi-
city partners, including
local leaders, businesses,
charities and others who
were seeking information
on how to respond.

“I really think the coun-
ty health department has
done a tremendous job. I
do think as a county we
need to do a better job of
getting information out to
the people. Which is
tough,” said Seneck.

At the first health
department meeting, the
virus would be at least as
dangerous as a worst-case
scenario, which could kill
more than 50,000 people
in a year.

But at that point in
time, we were scrambling
for information - we simply
didn’t know. And we
thought there was a lot of panic
mode,” explained Seneck.

We had masks and
we had masks. And we
had masks. You had
gloves on. You
had masks.”

“At the town we
responded pretty quickly.
We ordered personal pro-
bective supplies right away
and we had some stuff, but
I said I don’t know where
this is going, but I can tell
you what’s going to hap-
pen is you won’t be able
to get things,” he said.

“In a surprise move
Seneck was made
Chenango County’s chair-
man at the start of 2021,
the public, along with
a number of other super-
visors and local leaders
began expressing concern
over the board’s response
and a number of issues related
to the pandemic, including
a lack of tech-
ology investment and
the pending loss of private
ambulance services.

“I kind of know the way
things in motion, and see-
stuff happening, and I
was something new and
unsure of how to respond.
I talked to people and
I certainly can set this up
for answers to questions
that could soon impact
Governor.

“If we can open our
cars? Can we operate our
summer youth program?
Can we open our
recreation centers? Can we
avoiding layoffs of town
employees. And was successful
in avoiding layoffs of town
employees.

“There was some
discussion about are we going
whether or not if you have
efficient supervisors
to support you. There was
discussion regarding communication
regarding COVID,” said Seneck.

I talked to people and
they want more updates on
what’s going on with COVID.
The health depart-
ment has done an out-
standing job, but people
look to the supervisors in the
town as if we know what’s going on,” he said.

In early 2020 before
he was appointed chairman
Seneck took other events in
the Town of Guilford.

“We were scrambling
anxiously for the best
information possible. This
was something new and
there were a lot of adjust-
ments that had to be made.
At that time I was mak-
ing - it was more a town
response.

He began searching
for answers to questions
that could soon impact
Governor.

“For us to open our
cars? Can we operate our
summer youth program?
Can we open our
recreation centers? Can we
avoiding layoffs of town
employees. And was successful
in avoiding layoffs of town
employees.

“There was some
discussion about are we going
to have to lay workers off and staff and what the budget was going to be for these services and what we can save for costs. As a public service we’re really stretched and if you’re laying people off you’re going to have personnel costs with the unemployment and so forth, and other issues with not getting the public what they need. It’s even more cost in the long run.

Chenango County blinded by rise of technology

“One of the things that I think has to happen in Chenango County and I guess it’s going to become my number two priority, after COVID, is we have to improve the technology on which the county operates.”

When COVID arrived and Cuomo ordered a lockdown, Chenango County was not prepared for remote operation. With about 15 to 20 percent of the employees working from home, the system froze up and out of more than a hundred employees, only about 30 were able to work remote when the county was locked down.

“When we tried putting more people on the system it just froze, it collapsed,” confirmed Seneck.

The situation caused by the pandemic, a lack of understanding by state officials and a lack of technology, made for hard choices for rural public officials.

Seneck said, “I think there was a lack of clarity on the part of the governor’s office, and I think the same thing impacted the county.”

“I know there was a move here to have people work remotely, but in order to work remotely you have to have, I’m going to say ‘The ability to have people do that.’”

He said Guilford had the same issue, facing unemployment payments and then the challenge of trying to bring back staff or hire new employees if things change. That prompt the question of whether you need to update the infrastructure, while others admitted to hardly even using a computer or a smartphone themselves.

Asked if there are still members of the Chenango County Board who don’t use computers at home Seneck admitted, “Sure we have board members who don’t use computers.”

Seneck said he was encouraging officials to learn more about technology.

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I ask you, “What can you do as a member of the county board of supervisors for the residents and businesses of Chenango County? I would ask you be as informed as possible, that you read your committee minutes before coming to the board sessions. How you use your time in understanding where technology is taking us in 2021.” - County Board Chairman George Seneck

weeks,” explained Seneck. “The county attempted to get tablets for employees through a grant, with Seneck noting: “You’re in town you’re not going to take your desktop with you.”

Apart from employees the need to invest in the county’s technological infrastructure has also impacted the public. There is a lack of basic cell phone service and internet for those living outside the Route 12 corridor and main population centers. In today’s reality of remote work demands and health uncertainties, this has cost some people their livelihoods or increased their chance of being exposed to COVID.

“I know there was a lack of direction, a lack of knowledge. You know I’m not a real tech person myself. But I really have felt that we need to use technology.”

Seneck recalled a conversation with a fellow supervisor made years ago as the county was spending more to develop better internet service in the community.

“We were talking about investment in broadband and how to go about it. We had a big debate whether the county should be investing in broadband in Chenango County or not. We had to make that investment in Chenango County years ago as the county was going to work remotely, you may not want to be the first person who gets on the bus, but if it proves good, you better make sure you get on the bus before it takes off.”

And my feeling is the bus left a long time ago and we’re going to have to run to catch up with the bus, and to catch up with where technology is going to take us,” said Seneck.

Seneck said he hoped to improve the county website.

“Is that something that really should be updated? Yes, if you want to promote business in the county, I think that the county website works fairly well. You know you can go in and you can find information there and so forth, but really in today’s world it’s a piece of media that’s out there and there it needs to be inviting.”

The county is trying to repair the rest, but the task is a huge one. “It’s been kind of the county’s position is that this is something we can take care of ourselves and I think it’s bigger than what our IT department can handle. We may need to pay for that outside help for this,” said Seneck.

Another issue raised was whether the county shared information about the October cyberattack. “The county downplayed the attack but when it became clear that votes cast in the 2020 elections were being impacted, local election officials were forced to reveal the extent it had impacted their department, and the county as a whole.

The former leadership even kept other board supervisors and those working in the county government in the dark. “I think has to happen in Chenango County,” said Seneck.

All those people that’s out there and they [investigators] secured the machines, being encrypted by malware and rendered useless,” said Seneck. “Why wasn’t the county investment in technology?”

I know there was a lack of direction, a lack of knowledge. You know I’m not a real super techie person myself. But I really have felt that we need to use technology.”

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Chenango County’s new chairman looks ahead and is not afraid to answer tough questions —

Continued from Page 63

ute discussion by the supervisors that were there, which I found diffi-
cult to swallow,” he said. “Because there was a lack of under-
standing of software and licensing and how if you expanded your
ability, you also have to expand your licensing for your firewalls and stuff, and I find that sometimes frustrating.”

Over the extent of the attack became clear.

“Our end we have to look at it as a learn-
ing curve. I don’t want to say too much, I was not in charge at the time. I think at least the people involved needed to share more information. I’ll talk about the board of supervi-
sors: We really, first of all, we didn’t even know it had happened,” he said.

Like the health depart-
ment, the county’s technol-
gy director did not give the board regular updates during 2020, or even during the cyberattack itself. The board released no information to the pub-
lic directly.

Asked if the technology department was ever asked to brief the board Seneck replied, “Not to my knowl-
edge.”

“I think we need to work

on the technology at the count-

y and I don’t know

that we have a handle on what we have here as far as: How many computers exactly do we have? How old are they? I don’t know

that there’s an adequate inventory. I don’t know

exactly what all the soft-
ware is that we’re using, and some of the software is what you’re going to call ‘proprietary software’ that per-
forms certain func-
tions.

Moving the county

forward

The appointment of

Seneck has been seen by

many as a significant turn-
ing point in how the coun-

try will move forward.

He is promoting reform, education and transparency.

The county is now col-

lecting information and conducting an inventory of its technology. Seneck has met with the IT depart-

ment several times.

“I told them they win the award that I know the names of everybody in the department already and I do have to rely on them

for some service to get my computer working,” he said.

He also wants the board to get more infor-

mation from the technol-
gy department and learn

more about the county’s systems.

“We need more of a basic understanding. I think we need to do some education pieces for the board related to technolo-
gy,” Seneck said.

“Certainly, you may not be using this technol-
y but you need to have an understand-
ing of what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. You’re here to make an educated decision on how we move forward, so that education piece is going to be important for the board members.”

“I know we have some supervisors who really don’t like using comput-
erware who aren’t too com-
puter savvy, but you need
to understand how those pieces fit in with county government,” he said.

The county and towns

hope to release more infor-

mation regarding COVID.

The county is working with the health department and others to promote technol-
yogy and assistance, especially to elderly gen-
erations who have a hard time using a computer.

“What else can we pos-
sibly do? It’s going to be a challenge. We have an aging population in this County. One of the things that was talked about when we had the depart-

ment meeting is that after people get their first vac-
cine, they’re going to have to be on a state registry to make sure they get their second vaccine. We have a lot of senior citizens who do not do anything with computers. There may be a service we need to pro-
vide,” he said.

The county is also keep-

ing a close eye on expenses and delaying some projects to save money.

“Maintaining the fis-

cal integrity of Chenango County amidst a pandemic is going to be an ongoing challenge, that I am sure we will be able to meet.”

“I am reaching out to the residents of Chenango County to ask themselves what they can do to build a better 2021 for us.”

I ask you, ‘What can you do as a member of the county board of supervi-
sors for the residents and businesses of Chenango County? I would ask you to be as imaginational as possible, that you read your commit-
tee minutes before coming to the board sessions. That you continue to ask ques-
tions and invest some of your time in understanding where technology is taking us in 2021.”

Once on top of the Chenango County Courthouse this statue of Lady Justice is not blindfolded. She is now on display inside the Chenango County board of supervi-
sors’ meeting room where she keeps her eyes on local politicians. (Photo by Tyler Murphy)
Sales Superstar Wanted!

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

As a locally operated funeral home in Norwich, we focus on providing families personal attention throughout the funeral planning process. Several staff members grew up in the area and continue to call it home. This enables our team to offer compassionate care while meeting the needs of our community.

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SERVING THE COMMUNITY

We hope you allow us the privilege to serve you during your time of need. Please contact R. J. Fahy Funeral Home to learn more about burial and cremation services or to tour our Norwich funeral home. Funeral planning can seem overwhelming. Losing a family member is an emotional experience, and grief can make the funeral planning process difficult. Pre-planning final arrangements helps relieve your family of both emotional and financial burdens. However, we also offer support to those who have an immediate need to plan a funeral for a family member or friend who has passed away. Whatever your need, R. J. Fahy Funeral Home® is here to help. We guide you every step of the way—from choosing between traditional burial planning and cremation, designing a religious ceremony or a celebration of life, and deciding on cemetery property. We even offer grief support services for you and your family.

Our Difference

We want you to feel confident planning a funeral for yourself or a loved one. Here are some of the unique benefits we offer to help relieve your family of emotional and financial burdens.

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- Free online obituary
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- 100% Price Guarantee on Pre-Planning

“...My family has known the Fahy family for years. My grandfather’s arrangements were made with them in 1959. I had made my mother’s arrangements in August 2018. She passed away in December 2017 and was cremated. Calling hours, obituary and Mass were arranged by Fahy’s for April 2018 on what would have been her 100th Birthday.”

- Verified Cremation Customer & Memorial Service Customer

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- Verified Pre-planner

“I want to thank R. J. Fahy, Funeral Home for their care and concern for my mother.”

- Verified Cremation Customer

“...At a time when choosing how to honor loved ones is difficult, the staff at R. J. Fahy Funeral Home® were there to offer support, compassion, and guidance.”

- Verified Cremation Customer

“...The team at R. J. Fahy Funeral Home® has always been there for us—ensuring we’re always well taken care of.”

- Verified Cremation Customer