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## Looking forward, not backward

As a diehard New York Mets fan, I know just how important it is to be optimistic in the spring.

After all, in a lot of season, we don't have much to enjoy once the calendar moves from spring to summer.



**Joe Soprano**  
Guest columnist

From what I understand, one of guest columnists in this special section – Will Beekman – understands that pain all too well.

This spring, however, I'm more than optimistic. And not just because my beloved Mets were sitting in first place just a few weeks into the season.

I'm feeling good about Northeastern Pennsylvania emerging from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and being stronger

than ever.

You can feel it as you walk through downtown Wilkes-Barre and see restaurants and bars come back to life. You can feel as you walk into businesses throughout the region that just a few short months ago were forced to close their doors but now are returning to the hustle of everyday business.

And you can feel in our parks and other recreation areas that are now filled with activity.

Of course, we still must be vigilant. We will wear out masks. We will get our vaccinations, and we will socially distance when appropriate.

But rest assured, life is slowly but surely returning to normal in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

I hope that the stories in the pages of this special section will leave you with the same confidence in the region that we at the Times Leader have.

We've talked to industry leaders. We've highlighted local businesses. We've given local business leaders a chance to express their views.

All of it leaves myself and my colleagues feeling pretty good about the future of Northeast Pa.

Now, about those Mets ...

Reach Executive Editor Joe Soprano at 570-991-6393 or on Twitter @jsoprano.

# Technology key for businesses

## Chamber head: Ability to adapt, new tools helping businesses rebound

**By Bill O'Boyle**

boboyle@timesleader.com

Wico van Genderen, president/CEO of the Greater Wyoming Valley Chamber, said the pandemic has disproportionately impacted business and industry in the region.

"For those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, in particular those relying on the movement and interaction of people, the recent improvements in the COVID infection rates, the more readily available vaccines for any individual that wants it and the recent passage of a multi-faceted Washington stimulus package should accelerate the reopening of businesses most dramatically impacted by the crisis," Van Genderen said. "As the broader economy recovers, many of the companies that were hit the hardest by the shutdowns now have the most to gain.

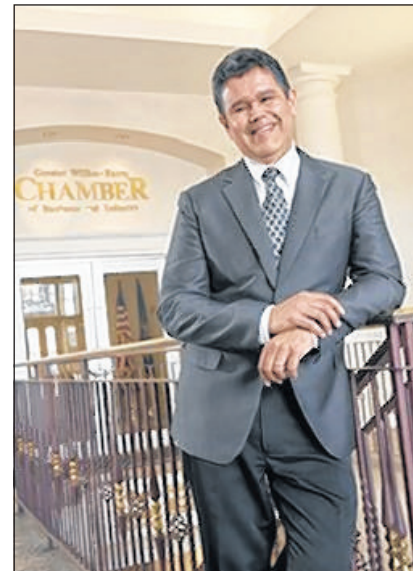
"However, the ability of businesses to adopt and use technology enabling tools brought on by innovation will shape the new normal."

Ah yes, the "new normal." What exactly does that mean and how will it shape our lives moving forward out of the pandemic and back into life as we once knew it?

Van Genderen says the Consumer and Industrial Goods Sector — made up of manufacturing, supply chain, e-commerce, warehousing, logistics and commercial industrial real estate — has remained relatively unscathed during COVID crisis.

In fact, he said during the pandemic this sector for NEPA has seen explosive growth.

"Driven primarily by a seismic shift in consumer purchasing habits, the pandemic helped push e-commerce sales to grow by 32% year-over-year and drove a heightened demand for more industrial space in NEPA," Van Genderen said. "The



Times Leader file photo

**Wico van Genderen, president/CEO of the Greater Wyoming Valley Chamber, says the Consumer and Industrial Goods Sector — made up of manufacturing, supply chain, e-commerce, warehousing, logistics and commercial industrial real estate — has remained relatively unscathed during COVID crisis.**

last three months of 2020 saw 6.8 million square feet in net absorption — the largest quarterly volume on record."

He added that nationally, NEPA's I-81/I-78/I-80 corridor ranks third in the nation in industrial absorption, making this sector of our economy not only the best set to recover from the pandemic, but in the post pandemic, it positions us for growth.

For business and industry segments that depend on the service, movement and interaction of people, Van Genderen said the pandemic has been much more challenging.

"It has been devastating to our hospitality and services sector — our main street small business restaurants, bars, salons and retailers, and those with business models based on in-person connections," Van Genderen said. "However, as

vaccines become more readily available, COVID numbers improve, and help from a massive COVID stimulus package, many of the businesses that were hit the hardest are set for a broader economic recovery and an opportunity for a re-imagined post-pandemic reverberation."

So what changes has the pandemic brought that won't be leaving any time soon?

Van Genderen said computer and information technology has become a critical change agent during the pandemic that won't be leaving any time soon — it has altered the business model in two key areas.

"One, the pandemic has brought a seismic shift in consumer and industrial purchasing habits toward e-commerce," Van Genderen said. "In doing so, it has subsequently driven a heightened demand for industrial real estate in NEPA. And with 70% of our economy dependent on consumer spending, it has accelerated e-commerce in the consumer and industrial goods and services sector forever."

Two, Van Genderen said, the pandemic forced the closure of offices, and individuals and businesses were made to adapt to an operational shift to work remotely to stay safe and stay open.

"In doing so, technology has driven a movement to remote productivity, team-enabling tools and automation that have made ZOOM and Microsoft Teams part of the workplace lexicon," he said.

Then what positive effects has the scramble to "flatten the curve" brought to the business community?

In a scramble to flatten the curve, Van Genderen said businesses have relied heavily on computer and information technology to keep



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## Key

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their workforce safe, stay socially distanced and keep some semblance of operational productivity.

"Its positive effect has been in the innovation and adoption of these technology-enabling tools in both the consumer and industrial goods sector and in the area of remote workforce productivity, automation, and reduced operating costs to offset others brought on by the pandemic," Van Genderen said.

And how are businesses adapting to the "new normal?"

"The pandemic brought on a seismic shift to e-commerce that enabled the goods and services sectors to remain relatively unscathed, resilient and to even have grown during the pandemic," Van Genderen said. "For these sectors the new norm is in the accelerated innovation and adoption of technology, automation and e-commerce."

### Downtown Wilkes-Barre

For Larry Newman, executive director at the Diamond City Partnership, in Downtown Wilkes-Barre, the focus is on getting people back to center city.

"We're working to make that happen through a DCP-led effort called 'Downtown Rebound' — which is a mix of marketing initiatives and safe outdoor events — all with a goal of rebuilding foot traf-



Times Leader file photo

**Larry Newman, executive director of the Diamond City Partnership, says the pandemic accelerated a number of existing trends — changes that had previously been occurring before COVID — just much more slowly.**

fic over the next few months," Newman said.

"However, increases in economic activity are ultimately dependent on the pace of vaccinations and the concurrent decline in COVID case counts. That's the only way to create the levels of consumer confidence needed for large numbers of people to return — initially to offices, schools, restaurants, and retailers; and then to hotels, entertainment venues, and large events."

In the meantime, Newman said DCP is working with its partners to double-down on the basics. In Downtown, he said that means being able to provide a safe, clean, walkable, human-scale urban environment.

"The pandemic shutdowns made that task undeniably more difficult — but if we want people to return, it's also a necessary precondition," Newman said.

Newman said the pandemic accelerated a number of existing trends — changes that had pre-

viously been occurring before COVID — just much more slowly.

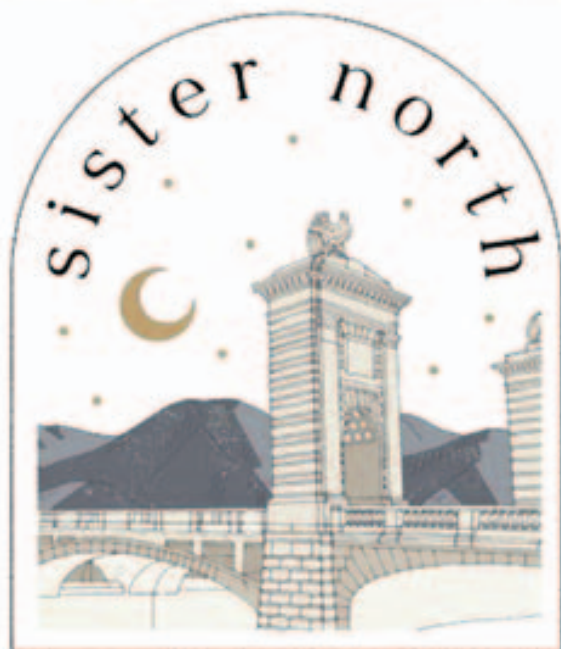
"The shakeout of non-competitive retail formats, the rise of e-commerce, the rise of remote work, more flexible schedules for office workers; and the increasing automation of a growing variety of jobs are all examples of trends that have been supercharged by COVID," Newman said.

All of those are global, "macro" changes, Newman said.

"We can't control them any more than we can keep the tide from rising," he said. "However, we can control our individual responses, and perhaps even turn some of these changes to our advantage."

Certainly, Newman added, the shutdowns forced many businesses to adapt new business practices and tools that, in the long run, will make them more competitive.





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## Key

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“For many brick-and-mortar storefront businesses, the past year became a crash course in how to build effective e-commerce platforms, market more effectively online, or expand beyond in-person dining to accommodate pickup or delivery,” Newman said. “They got those things done during the past 12 months, and they will continue to build on them going forward.”

One pandemic necessity that Newman strongly believes will emerge as a virtue over the long-term is the expansion of

outdoor dining options. For many restaurants, he said the pandemic restrictions made outdoor dining a necessity — but now they are starting to realize that it can also be viewed as an amenity.

“And, here in downtown, the scramble of the past year has served to strengthen the bonds in our center-city business community,” Newman said. “Businesses are communicating with each other more effectively, and there’s a renewed appreciation of the ways in which we’re dependent upon each others’ success. That newfound unity is something that we’re certainly

going to build upon.”

Even as people return to offices, entertainment venues and restaurants, Newman said many of the changes fostered by the pandemic shutdowns are going to remain. He said many restaurants will continue to offer delivery; many businesses will provide more flexible work-from-home schedules as appropriate; and many arts and entertainment venues will offer both live and streaming programming.

“And, as we move forward, a lot of business owners are going to work hard to make their enterprises as resilient as possible,” Newman said. “While you can’t plan

for every catastrophe, there are things you can do in every business to mitigate risk and lessen exposure to an unforeseen circumstance.”

### Greater Pittston rebuilding

Michelle Mikitish, executive vice president at the Greater Pittston Chamber of Commerce, said even as the COVID-19 pandemic lingers, business are starting to rebound. She said the most obvious indicator of rebound in the Greater Pittston region and beyond is the vast number of employers looking to hire.

She cited USHydrations, The Home Depot, Milazzo Industries, Card-

box Packaging, PepsiCo, SCHOTT, Pride, Topsy Turtle, Quietflex, US Foods, Benco, Geisinger, FedEx, Lowes, and more as prime examples.

Mikitish said it appears that facial coverings and social distancing may be with us for a bit longer than anyone had hoped.

“But as we each begin to venture back out into our communities we can be confident that we will be safe,” Mikitish said. “So many of our public facing entities — storefronts, restaurants, personal service providers, financial institutions and more — have done a fantastic job of creating policies and procedures to

ensure the safety of both you, their customers, and their employees.”

Mikitish said small businesses learned much during the pandemic.

“Sometimes it was good, other times, not so much,” she said. “Yet most businesses rose to the challenge. We saw new services like curbside pick-up, online ordering, and social media outreach, that will very likely remain a big part of the service industry. Outdoor activities became the go-to entertainment for most of us and many places have made long-term investments in outdoor facilities that will be in use for

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## Key

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years to come.”

Mikitish said most businesses adjusted very quickly to the “new normal” and in many ways have worked procedural changes into their organization in a way that most customers don’t even notice.

“Service providers like hair and beauty salons, food service providers, professional services and more have installed physical barriers, enforce social distancing and implement special cleaning procedures in such a way that the customers experience is minimally impacted,” Mikitish said.

### Visitors Bureau plan

Theodore B. Wampole, Jr., executive director at the Luzerne County Convention & Visitors Bureau, said since there is a need to attract people to come back to downtown, and knowing that people will come back to areas first where they can feel safe, his office will continue to promote Wilkes-Barre and all of Luzerne County as a safe place to visit.

“Specifically, we know people will probably feel very comfortable in the outdoors, so with all of our lakes, rivers, streams, parks and trails, we are an ideal place for people to visit and encourage our residents to also take advantage of all we have to offer,” Wampole said. “Also, we know our entertainment venues are anxious to

resume offering great events and expect both residents and visitors to take advantage when the opportunities become available. And where do people go when they attend these shows? Our restaurants, taverns and bars, of course.”

Wampole noted that when people come to town, they will need a place to stay, if they stay overnight, so that will bode well for many hotels, B&B’s, etc.

“People will remain a little anxious for a while, until they feel comfortable venturing out, so I think you will still see a lot of the CDC guidelines being followed for the near future, such as mask-wearing, social-distancing, etc.,” Wampole said.

Wampole said he has seen businesses get creative with how they do business — increased delivery, take-out offers/deals, etc.

“Our business community is resilient and I look forward to continuing to offer support and promoting them as much as possible,” Wampole said. “Again, part of it will be making sure people feel safe and we will do our best to continue promoting the message that Luzerne County is safe and ready.”

### Opportunities going forward

John Augustine, president/CEO at Penn’s Northeast, said he believes there is tremendous opportunity going forward.

“Those retailers that were able to weather



Times Leader file photo

**Theodore B. Wampole, Jr., executive director at the Luzerne County Convention & Visitors Bureau, says his office will continue to promote Wilkes-Barre and all of Luzerne County as a safe place to visit.**

the pandemic will come back stronger as people are eager to get outside, shop and spend money,” Augustine said. “Downtown living continues to show growth.”

Augustine said restaurants that offer dine-in, delivery and take-out will do well; retailers that have both brick and mortar, as well as an internet presence, will survive.

“In addition, people working in offices will return to work on a limited and variable rate,” he said. “That in turn will create some very affordable vacancy rates for new office tenants. All businesses will have

to adapt to changing technologies in order to be successful.”

Augustine said retail as we know it will be forever changed.

“Malls are done and will not come back like they once were,” he said. “They will become multi-use facilities — some retail, senior living centers, doctor’s offices, warehouses, etc.”

E-commerce and online shopping will only continue to grow at a record pace,” Augustine said. Artificial intelligence and robotics are on the verge of becoming mainstreamed.

“Remember this —

robots don’t get COVID,” Augustine said.

The keys to flattening the curve, Augustine said, are “innovation and forced flexibility.”

Augustine said, “On the innovation side we saw in the business world how ZOOM became a tool for something it wasn’t even designed for. Businesses had to figure out how to operate remotely to survive. No one would have thought five years ago that this was even feasible, but eventually it worked.”

On forced flexibility, Augustine said businesses had to learn how to adapt.

“No more Monday morning meetings in the conference room — no more travel for conferences or meetings,” Augustine said. “People were sent home to work remotely without the tools they needed to be productive — no laptops, printers, etc. Almost everyone experienced slow internet speeds. Both spouses worked from home, while their children attended virtual school. A mass purchasing of pandemic puppies. And not knowing what day of the week it was and the list goes on.”

But on the positive side, Augustine said we learned that remote working can work. Places like Wilkes-Barre and Scranton are implementing Verizon 5G faster than expected to meet the growing demand. Restaurants reinvented themselves. E-commerce has exploded as people had no choice but to shop remotely — as stores were closed and shelves were bare. Generations like Baby Boomers became much more tech

savvy in order to stay connected with family or shop.

“We all learned quickly that our world around us was and is changing faster than we can keep up with,” Augustine said. “In the end we learned to be successful, we must be willing to be flexible and continue to be innovative.”

As far as adapting to the “new normal,” Augustine doesn’t think they are completely adapting because no one knows what the “new normal” is yet and it will be some time before we do know.

“Extremism in any form is a very bad thing,” he said. “We went from shopping, schooling, working, playing and living normal lives to the exact opposite by being confined to our homes.”

Going forward, Augustine believes we will live in a hybrid world — working from home some days, in the office others; in person meetings sometimes, ZOOM and conference calls other times; traveling to meetings only when necessary, etc.

“I think it will be quite some time before massive gatherings are brought back,” Augustine said. “Even when allowed, you will have people that won’t want to be part of it.”

“People and businesses should use this time to reflect on the past, present and future and to begin to set realistic expectations going forward.

“This isn’t the first pandemic and it will definitely not be the last.”



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# Ready for another revitalization

**WILKES-BARRE** — Twenty years ago, downtown Wilkes-Barre was in crisis.

It was a crisis occurring in slow motion — and it felt like death by a thousand cuts.

Wilkes-Barre's central business district — the once-undisputed commercial center of the Wyoming Valley — had been completely rebuilt following the devastation of the 1972 flood.

But over the course of a decade, all of that post-flood progress seemed to have come undone.

One after another, downtown retailers had closed their doors or headed for the suburbs. Corporate mergers absorbed the regional banks that had long anchored downtown office buildings. Many professional firms also found reasons to depart. The King's and Wilkes campuses were islands separated from the rest of the city.

Downtown — a place once synonymous with sidewalks, streets and parks crowded with shoppers, office workers, moviegoers and anyone who wanted to be in the center of things — had become a trash-strewn shadow of its former self.

Community leaders made a concerted effort



**Larry Newman**  
Guest  
Columnist

to turn the tide, but their initial enthusiasm soon gave way to acrimony and frustration.

There were endless arguments about possible solutions — free parking; more parking; some singular development project that could “fix” things once and for all.

Others wrote off Wilkes-Barre's central business district as hopelessly dirty, dangerous and dysfunctional, confidently stating that “downtown is dead.”

This was the context for the Diamond City Partnership's creation in 2001 — the result of almost 1,000 local residents working together to craft a new vision for downtown Wilkes-Barre's future.

DCP became the nonprofit keeper of that vision, convening private and public stakeholders around a comprehensive plan for a more vibrant central city, and systematically working with those partners to turn the plan into action.

In 2007, downtown's commercial property owners voted to create the Downtown Wilkes-Barre Business Improvement District (BID) — which gave DCP the ability to provide a full range of place manage-

ment services to the city's commercial core.

The results of DCP's deliberate, incremental approach to revitalization speak for themselves.

From 2007 through 2020, downtown Wilkes-Barre saw a net gain of 55 occupied storefronts; 216 new market-rate housing units (with 30 more coming online in 2021), and more than \$200 million in private investment. It had become a college town, a hub for tech start-ups and a regional destination for dining and entertainment.

And, in the most recent Perception & Use Survey that DCP had conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, two-thirds of the respondents — including 71% of downtown workers and 94% of downtown business owners — told us that downtown Wilkes-Barre was “headed in the right direction.”

Today, downtown Wilkes-Barre faces a new crisis — one that often feels as daunting as what we had confronted 20 years ago.

Successful downtowns bring people together, but COVID turned every gathering into a public health threat. At the start of 2020, more than 11,000 people worked downtown — three months later, the office buildings were empty. So were the F.M. Kirby

Center, Movies 14, the college campuses, and — for a long time — most of our stores and restaurants. Wilkes-Barre's downtown economic engine, responsible for generating more than a quarter of its total tax revenue, was largely silenced.

Today, as DCP marks its 20th anniversary, it must undertake another downtown recovery. However, the same principles that guided the previous revival will help

downtown Wilkes-Barre rebound again.

Here's a guiding irony of the digital age:

If work can be done from anywhere, then a community's “quality of place” — the particular set of characteristics that make a community attractive and desirable — becomes key to its economic competitiveness.

In other words, if we cultivate a downtown environment where people want to spend time,

office tenants, residents, visitors and new businesses will follow.

That's done by focusing on the basics of good city-making — creating a place that's clean, safe, attractive, walkable and designed for people — while continuing to build on downtown's most important assets: its mixed-use urban environment; its Public Square and riverfront; its remarkable historic

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# Wilkes-Barre Township seeing business growth

By Bill O'Boyle

boboyle@timesleader.com

**WILKES-BARRE TWP.** — Mundy Street in Wilkes-Barre Township has seen major economic development in recent years and, if all goes according to plan, much more is on the way.

After coming back from the June 2018 that severely damaged many buildings in the Arena Hub Plaza, Wilkes-Barre Township Commons and other stores and buildings along Mundy Street, coronavirus pandemic followed two years later to wreak more havoc.

But as they say, neither a tornado nor a pandemic can keep a good area down.

The area around the Wyoming Valley Mall continues to thrive — old, established businesses are again flourishing, while others are on the verge of coming back — Panera Bread, for one, is set to open in June.

And perhaps most promising is the proposed project for the former Valley Crest nursing home that appears to be moving forward.

But let's begin with what is already there and thriving.

Thomas Zedolik, Wilkes-Barre Township zoning and code enforcement officer, talked about the Mundy Street progress and other good news in the township.

"We had to take it one



One of two hotels being built near the Mohegan Sun Arena at Casey Plaza in Wilkes-Barre Township.

Bill O'Boyle | Times Leader

day at a time," Zedolik said. "With the tornado, a lot of work had to be done — there was so much destruction. I'll never forget it."

But, Zedolik said, everybody got back up and started cleaning up, rebuilding and reopening. He said most of

the affected businesses have either reopened or moved to another location in the township. A few vacant lots remain to be developed — including the former sites of Kurlancheek and Ashley furniture stores.

And just as everything appeared to be returning

to normal post-tornado, the pandemic arrived and everything was shut down. Projects like two new hotels under construction were halted, for instance.

"Once we got the OK to resume, everybody has done the best they could and again we are moving

forward," Zedolik said. "The two hotels are up and will be completed by late summer and Panera Bread will open in late spring/early summer."

Add to that a new Burger King at Blackman Street and Route 309, a new McDonald's on Route 309, and the

conversion of the former Wilkes-Barre Township High School to an apartment complex and you can see why Zedolik and his boss, Mayor Carl Kuren, are optimistic.

And did we mention a new restaurant — Flam-

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## Growth

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ing Crab — coming next to Walmart?

The new Panera Bread in the Wilkes-Barre Township Commons off of Mundy Street is nearing completion, but the developer recently said that there currently are no plans to build another strip of retail spaces.

Zedolik said the Wilkes-Barre Township Commons was devastated by the tornado of June 2018 and the buildings that housed Panera and other retail stores were condemned and demolished.

Panera is nearing completion of a free-standing building that will feature a drive-through lane.

Chris Weilminster, executive vice president and chief operating officer at Urban Edge Prop-

erties of Paramus, New Jersey, site developer, said he hopes Panera will open soon.

“The tornado was obviously a horrible event for us and our neighbors in the community,” Weilminster said. “We are happy to be able to bring back a cherished place like Panera Bread. We are extremely pleased to be able to do that.”

But as far as additional development on the site, Weilminster said that decision is yet to be determined.

“Everything is undecided at this time,” he said last month. “Any decision would be deal-driven — we would have to find the right tenants for any transaction to make sense. Right now, there are no negotiations going on for future development of that parcel.”

Zedolik said he has been informed that the project at Blackman

Street and Route 309 has changed in name — the original plans called for a Turkey Hill to be built, but Zedolik said it will now be a Cumberland Farms complex.

“It will be the same thing — the type of development has not changed, just the name,” Zedolik said. “A convenience store with gas pumps.”

Zedolik said he is awaiting a land development application for the former Bob Evans Restaurant site, which closed in 2020, and will become an American Discount Tire store. The building on the site now will be demolished and a new building will go up,” Zedolik said.

### Valley Crest property

Robert Tamburro, General Partner/Trustee, TFP Limited Real Estate Development and Management, said Valley

Crest Real Estate LP, which is part of the Tamburro family of companies, is planning to develop 90 acres of property where the Valley Crest Nursing Home formerly was located near the VA Medical Center..

Tamburro said environmental abatement work inside the building is being done and when completed, it will be demolished beginning in June.

Tamburro said he is also working with PennDOT to finalize a traffic study for the proposed highway improvements at Route 309 and Mundy Street. He said he has received \$3.3



Bill O'Boyle | Times Leader

**Robert Tamburro, general partner/trustee, TFP Limited Real Estate Development and Management**

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## Newman

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architecture; its colleges and universities; its arts venues.

While the specific functions of main streets evolve, the qualities that attract people and investment to city centers are timeless.

It's worth noting that, even as COVID restrictions emptied most of the city's commercial core, downtown's residential landlords experienced no slowdown in demand for their new apartments.

After more than a year of drive-through living, people are longing for opportunities to be together once again.

So, as vaccinations continue and restrictions ease, DCP will be reanimating downtown spaces with outdoor dining and events.

We will continue to improve the physical environment by creating a comfortable pedestrian experience, restoring historic buildings, and investing in the quality of the public realm.

We will continue to support downtown's businesses with resources, advocacy, and assis-

tance.

And, we will use downtown's newly secured Main Street Program designation to full advantage.

DCP has accomplished a lot during 20 years. Now, it's time to roll up our sleeves once more, and we aren't going to stop until Wilkes-Barre's city center is again an economically vibrant point of pride for our entire community.

Looking forward to seeing you soon in downtown Wilkes-Barre!

Larry Newman is the Executive Director of the Diamond City Partnership.

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## Growth

From page 11

million in multi-modal grants for the proposed improvements, which would include highway improvements from Jack Williams Tire Co. to TGI Fridays.

"We need to have the traffic study done to clear the way for us to get the access for our property to develop it," Tamburro said. "Our plan is for a mixed-use project requiring mixed-use zoning to accommodate retail, entertainment, medical, residential, etc. development."

Tamburro said the estimated project cost is

more than \$100 million.

Last week, Gov. Tom Wolf announced that Valley Crest Real Estate, LP, will receive \$3 million to address significant traffic congestion around Route 309 and Kidder/Mundy Streets, including ramp reconfiguration, new ramps, additional signage, and traffic signal improvements.

Tamburro said he is grateful for this significant funding and we look forward to working with PennDOT in upgrading this vital section of Route 309.

"We are exploring other grant programs to complete the highway improvements," Tamburro said. "Funding is a key part of this. We can't

develop our property without resolving the existing traffic issues. It's a highly congested area."

Tamburro said setting a timeline for the project depends on securing the necessary funding.

"We've done a lot of homework, spent a lot of money," Tamburro said. "This is an extensive project that will create a lot of jobs and tax revenue for Plains Township and the Wilkes-Barre Area School District."

The jobs include the initial construction jobs, then more long-term jobs in the businesses that will open at the site.

"In addition to the jobs, the project will improve traffic flow," Tamburro said. "There

are a lot of winners here — no losers."

Tamburro said PennDOT has been working with him to secure grant funding.

Tamburro said the process has been a challenge because of funding, plus the restrictions brought on by the pandemic that slowed the process, not to forget the tornado of 2018.

"The pandemic did slow down some things," Tamburro said. "But we remain confident that we will be able to put together the same project we planned pre-COVID."

Tamburro called the project "a game-changer" for the region, noting that the location is at the "gateway to Wyoming Valley." He said the project will also enhance the perception of the area.

Rich Roman, PennDOT engineer, explained that a Highway Occupancy Permit is needed for the project to have access onto a state road.

"It's for safety reasons," Roman said. "HOPs are needed for the smallest driveways to the largest developments."

Roman said the Traffic Impact Study for large projects like the Valley Crest project — which will generate a lot more traffic — will have to have a Traffic Impact Study done that will show the impact of the development on traffic and it is up to the developer to mitigate any potential impacts that arise from the development.

Roman said the Traffic

Impact Study has been submitted and PennDOT is reviewing it and will provide comments.

"We are flushing out the issues we are seeing and what they are proposing," Roman said. "Once we approve the traffic impact study, PennDOT will issue the HOP to allow access to the state road."

Roman said the developer must make the necessary changes to the state highway, with the approval of PennDOT.

Tamburro's Valley Crest Real Estate LP purchased the former nursing home from Luzerne County for \$2.075 million in 2015 with plans to tear down the asbestos-filled structures to construct a retail, hotel and apartment complex called Valley Crest Commons.

However, as Roman said, the state won't issue the HOP for the project until congestion is addressed along the stretch of Route 315 and Business Route 309 (Kidder Street) between Mundy Street and the Cross Valley Expressway.

Tamburro said he does not plan to seek a tax diversion to fund highway work at this time because that request was not advanced by the Wilkes-Barre Area School Board.

The company had proposed a Tax Incremental Financing diversion, or TIF. Under this program, Valley Crest Real Estate would have paid real estate taxes on the new construction as usual. But instead of keeping that revenue, taxing bod-

ies agree to temporarily use the money to repay a portion of the infrastructure loan needed for the highway improvements.

Plains Township officials had approved the TIF. The request did not come before county council because that typically does not occur unless both other taxing bodies have granted approval.

Tamburro is affiliated with several family-owned companies, including the one that developed and owns the Arena Hub Plaza in Wilkes-Barre Township.

Tamburro said there are two vacancies at his property on Mundy Street— 2,200 square feet located next to Hand & Stone Massage and Facial Spa. He expects to have a letter of intent signed and a new tenant will be in that space this year, or early next year.

Another 6,000 square feet is available in the space formerly occupied by Pier 1 Imports. Tamburro said he may split that up two or three ways.

"The interest level has been very high," he said.

Tamburro also said Blaze Pizza will be locating next to Mission Barbecue and will open late summer/early fall of 2021.

Tamburro said there is also interest in the vacant lot where Ashley Furniture stood, but he couldn't release any details.

Reach Bill O'Boyle at 570-991-6118 or on Twitter @TLBillOBoyle.



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# Help the Wyoming Valley become a better place

I write this as I sit in my apartment in the Rolling Mill Hill section of Wilkes-Barre – just a few short miles from downtown Wilkes-Barre, where I spend most of my time leading Coal Creative. It's the golden hour and the light is hitting the plants in my front room just right – a perfect moment to reflect on the place I call home.

As an almost 31-year-old young woman and business owner, Wilkes-Barre



**Holly K. Pilcavage**  
Guest columnist

is exactly the place I want to be. That's a strong statement, some might say, but I assure you – it's true. I have traveled to 48 states, lived in four of them, and at 26 years old, found my way back in the Valley. When

I was younger, I swore to myself I'd never grow old here. So to come to terms with my return, I made myself another promise: I pledged to do everything I could to

make it better.

One of my mottoes comes from a Pinterest post I read a few years ago: "Leave people, places, and things better than you found them." After some time, I realized I wanted to get rid of the "leave" part. I changed it to read "Help people, places, and things become better than you found them."

There is a lot of work to be done in Wilkes-Barre and the surrounding region. But I feel an energy growing every day, fueling the region

to wake up and realize its potential as a collective. I noticed it when I moved back here almost five years ago, and it's something I've experienced growing – even amid a pandemic. If anything, it's grown stronger more quickly because of it – proving that if we all come together, we can make it through. It will not be easy – nothing really ever is. But what's the old saying? A diamond is created under pressure? We are the Diamond City after all.

Our community is one

of the most supportive I've ever been a part of. Whether you are looking to fuel your soul, your work, your body, your community – there is something here for you.

Community is made when enough people choose to engage, commit and give back. Change and progression occur when enough people decide to start something new or be a part of something with longstanding traditions — it all comes down to a choice.

Our community grows

stronger when more people get behind groups that are making positive changes – groups like, but not limited to: the Greater Wyoming Valley Chamber of Commerce's Young Professionals Network, Women's Network, Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Council, Nonprofit Council, and the Government Affairs Council. Also, the numerous organizations that better our communities through supporting, advocating, and educating, such as

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# Pivoting to deal with unprecedented times

WILKES-BARRE — COVID 19 has profoundly impacted the Wyoming Valley's socio-economic landscape.

It created a public health, workforce, community, business and economic crisis and in its wake, disrupted lives, strained families, overwhelmed our health-care system, shutdown businesses and impacted our economic infrastructures and norms.

Its impact across the population however, has been disproportionate, affecting some much more than others. For some, particularly those who have experienced full blown COVID-19, it has had a catastrophic health and economic impact on their lives, income and families. But for others it has had far less of an impact, especially to those with asymptomatic experiences, who work in essential occupations or could continue to be productive remotely.

We have seen similar disruptive parallels in business and industry that we have seen with the general population. On the positive, COVID-19 has left some business and industry segments relatively unscathed. In particular those sectors that depend on the movement of goods and information; includ-



**Wico van Genderen**  
Guest  
Columnist

ing supply chain, e-commerce, logistics, warehousing, manufacturing, and commercial industrial real estate. All have shown remarkable resiliency during the COVID crisis.

In fact, these segments have been a key economic growth driver in our region both in our pre-pandemic past and now during the pandemic. Ironically, 2020 saw record industrial real estate growth in our region — known nationally as the I-80, I-81, I-78 corridor.

Driven primarily by a seismic shift in consumer purchasing habits, the pandemic helped push ecommerce sales to grow by 32% year-over-year and drove a heightened demand for more industrial space in NEPA. The last three months of 2020 saw 6.8 million square feet in net absorption, the largest quarterly volume on record.

In its report, "A Record-Breaking Year for the I-81/I-78 Corridor," Cushman & Wakefield (C&W) said 23.5 million square feet of industrial space was absorbed along the corridor in 2020, a 40% increase over the previous annual record and an 80% increase above the three-year average.

Regarding total industrial absorption, C&W

ranked the corridor's 23.5 million square feet third in the nation topped only by Atlanta at 26.4 million square feet and Dallas/Fort Worth at 24.3 million square feet. Certainly, being third in the nation in industrial absorption makes this sector of our economy not only best set to recover from the pandemic, but in the post-pandemic, positions us for growth.

On the downside, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted business and industry sectors that rely on a healthy interaction with the public and the movement of people. It has been challenging to our hospitality and services sector; our main street small business restaurants, bars, salons and retailers, and those with business models based on in person connections. It has disproportionately impacted them in lost revenues, a furloughed workforce with lost wages, added expense and supply constraints due to safety restrictions and protocols, intermittent closures, and crimped demand with their customer base. For example, at the height of the pandemic some 80% of restaurant workers were furloughed and one national survey indicates that one quarter to a third of small business restaurants may not survive.

Regarding the small business retail sector, the pandemic has accelerated an already ongoing trend to e-commerce and amplifies the need to use technology to pivot their traditional storefronts with the idea of creating on-line platforms alongside their traditional storefronts with the concept of "click to order" complimenting their "brick and mortar" in order to compete with the better funded, diversified big box e-commerce enterprises.

Even as the pandemic has been particularly damaging for small businesses, in aggregate they represent the majority of businesses in the United States and employ nearly half of all private sector workers. And most troubling, as a whole, small business revenue going into the 4th quarter 2020 was down 20 percent, while those in the hospitality and leisure sector were down close to 50%. As the pandemic wears on, the recovery for these small businesses becomes all the more challenging. For northeastern Pennsylvania, made up primarily of small businesses, this is particularly worrisome.

It is in this backdrop that our Chamber pivoted off our strategic plan to develop a COVID RESPOND, RETURN and RE-IMAGINE Strategy to inoculate our businesses, workforce

and economy to help rebuild and re-tool them. While the Pandemic has not changed our "core vision" — in connecting the community, building economic innovation and elevating the quality of life in the region, nor has it changed our "mission" — with a singular focus to accelerate the economic engine of the region by fostering innovation, connecting our resources and elevating and advocating for our community. It has, however, changed our playbook and execution plan in which we pivoted to a three-pronged COVID Plan: RESPOND, RETURN and RE-IMAGINE.

In "RESPOND," we partnered with other certified economic development organizations (CEDO's) to work directly with federal, state and local grant, loan and stimulus programs to assist businesses in need to help shore up their financials. Our industrial fund is actively managing over \$20 million in State and Federal Grants on projects across the county. Our efforts included access to over \$2 million in COVID Working Capital Access Programs from the state to assist over 25 companies and protecting some 260 jobs. We helped connect businesses with the County and Penn's Northeast in their effort to distribute over \$10

million in grants to businesses and non-profit organizations in need.

And we are currently working with the County and Hazleton's CAN-DO to distribute a \$3.5 million Hospitality Grant Program in support of food/beverage services, restaurants, accommodations/lodging and small businesses in the Hospitality Sector to help them through the pandemic. We have been running workshops and tutorials on navigating Cares Act, DCED, SBA and PPP access to financing packages.

And with an eye on our small business community, have begun programs on shop local platforms and connecting them to local expertise to create their own point and click websites.

Finally, We partnered with our regional chambers, economic development organizations, the county and Discover NEPA to create a regional resource to business, health/wellness, and operational/structural data through an informational COVID website with access to health, business, community and family programs to assist and guide our community through the pandemic.

With "Return" we worked with our county, community, health and business experts to estab-



## Better

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the NEPA Rainbow Alliance.

I think many of us want to do something bigger than ourselves, but we often don't realize that we already are. We're in the middle of it – right now, in this moment, we're part of that "something bigger." Every decision inevitably creates the ripple effect that encourages or discourages our community's growth. Make choices that help you flourish, and this city will be better for it. I can guarantee that there are plenty of people here, ready and willing, to support you, encourage you, to take that next (and probably a little bit scary) step to creating the life you might have convinced yourself will never be possible in Wilkes-Barre.

Holly K. Pilcavage is owner and CEO of Coal Creative.

## Pivoting

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lish plans, sequences and protocols to help restore and return in line with the Federal, State and local phased approach plans. We worked with the County to develop Luzerne County Ready with a certification process to help open businesses with the proper safety protocols and PPE products for the safety of both customers and employees.

We created an outdoor retail pop-up village in the Public Square over the Holidays to allow small businesses and retailers to open in a socially distanced, outdoor venue. We created a virtual Job Fair with over

75 employers to match those seeking jobs and displaced by the pandemic to align to area employers looking to hire.

With "Re-Imagine", we are working to determine what our businesses and labor force will need to look like in the post-pandemic new normal to build for growth, resiliency and sustainability. In partnership with The Institute and our other regional chambers we sent out surveys and conducted focus groups to over 700 businesses to better understand the impacts and needs created by the Pandemic. From it we are starting with a focus on workforce by creating programs to up-skill and up-train our workforce to the key job markets we need to

build and attract.

We have engaged with the Federal Economic Development Agency (EDA), the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) and the Appalachian Redevelopment Commission (ARC) to help fund workforce development programs. And in doing so are partnering with PA Career Link and The Institute and with the private sector with Mobiniti, Linked IN Learning and Codelious on developing NEPA Works to look at aligning jobs, skill-sets and looking at critical needs to ensure we are in front of a labor force recovery for our area.

Finally, we partnered with Penn State and Codelious with a grant from the Appa-

lachian Regional Commission to develop Coding the Coal Region, a curriculum designed to train students and those displaced to software programming certification. And we are continuing to align private sector with public sector with our Connect partners at The Institute, the SBDC, the Family Business Alliance, Career Link, Ben Franklin Technology, Diamond City Partnership and our area Colleges and Universities to leverage the best of the private and public sectors to re-imagine a post pandemic Wyoming Valley.

As vaccines become more readily available, COVID numbers improve, and our main streets begin to

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**"I SAW FIRSTHAND THE IMPACT ON MY KIDS AND THE REACTIONS OF THEIR FRIENDS. I ALSO HAD PARENTS COME UP TO ME AND TELL ME HOW EXCITED THEIR KIDS WERE TO HAVE ME IN THE CLASSROOM. I ENJOYED IT."**

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## Pivoting

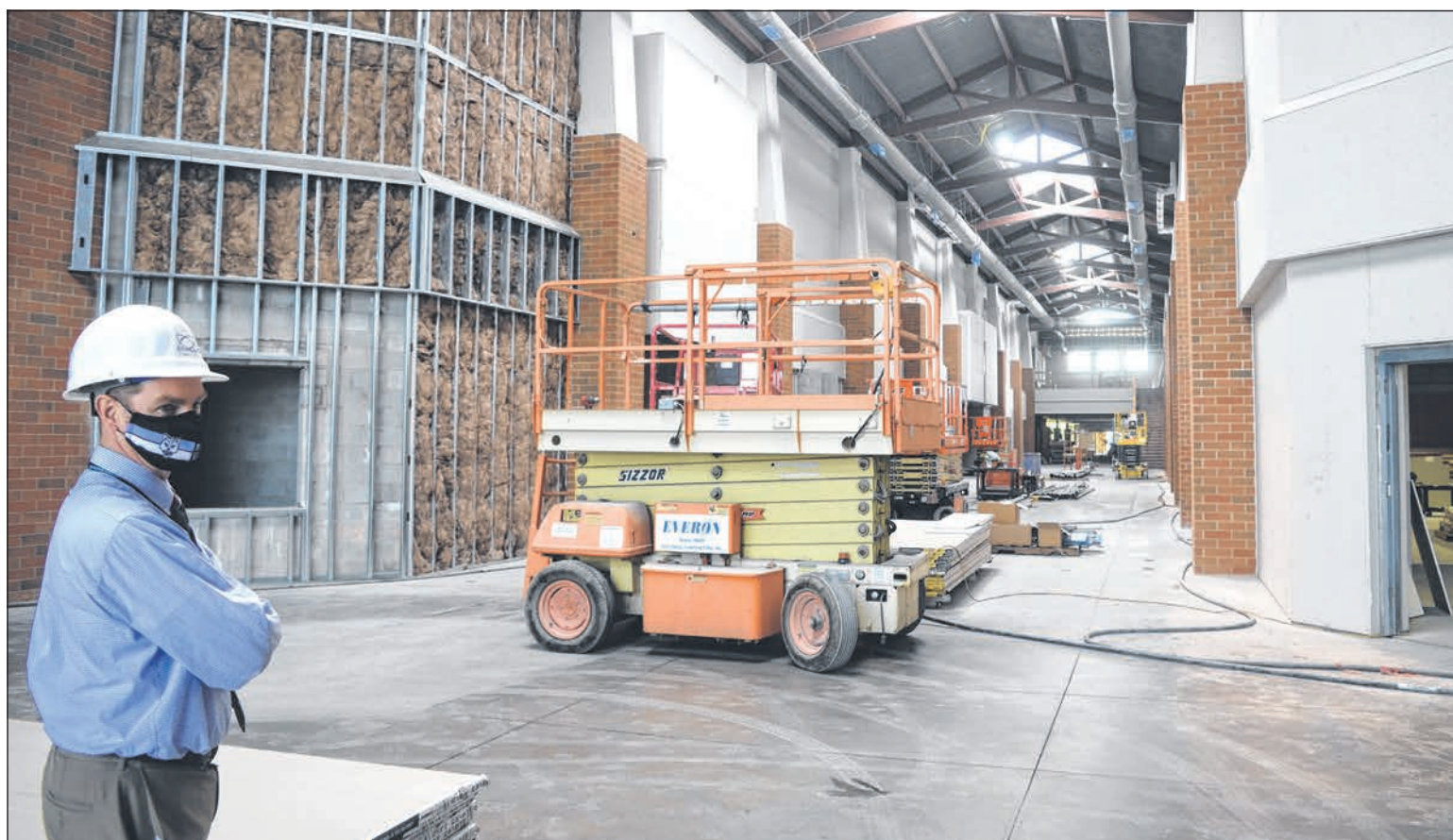
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re-open, many of the businesses that were hit the hardest are set for a broader economic recovery and an opportunity for a re-imagined post pandemic reverberation. Although we can't control what happened as a result of the Pandemic, we can control the response plan for what we want to happen and execute on a post pandemic plan on how to make it happen.

While there are no historical perspectives, road maps or tactical play books to help us definitively return to a sense of normalcy, fundamental business principles apply. Our core vision to connect the community, building economic innovation and elevating the quality of life in the region remains intact.

And our mission to accelerate the economic engine of the region by fostering innovation, connecting our resources and elevating and advocating for our community has not changed and is in full force. Now as we pivot in execution on a three-pronged COVID Plan: RESPOND, RETURN and RE-IMAGINE we are writing the script to our post-pandemic future. And in the end, one thing is for certain, we will re-bound and as a community we will come back healthier and stronger together.

Wico van Genderen is president/CEO of Greater Wyoming Valley Chamber.



Mark Guydish | Times Leader

Wilkes-Barre Area School District Superintendent Brian Costello stands in the nearly completed main hall, dubbed "Main Street" of the new consolidated high school set to open this fall.

# Big new in education: High school, special needs center, charter school, more

By Mark Guydish

mguydish@timesleader.com

Some very big changes are coming for K-12 education in 2021, and the biggest weren't prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The largest, literally: Wilkes-Barre Area School District's new consolidated high school, which by the start of April stood 85% complete and visible from the Cross Valley Expressway.

Everything is now enclosed,

the pool clearly formed, acoustic tiles hung in the auditorium, and as of the end of March the floor boards were going down in the gym, where the second-level track loops around what amounts to two basketball courts that will be either separated by a partition or joined to host larger events.

Terrazzo floors are being poured and polished in the classroom wings, and "Main Street," the master hallway cleaving the bulk of the building into two sections, towers

the full length of the building, brick columns on each side and sun flooding through three skylights.

Costello talked of the innovations the new school will provide, including "pop up" stores along main street, grab and go food kiosks for students, or tables extending the adjacent cafeteria. He shows a picture on his phone of the auditorium acoustic panels back-lit with blue LEDs.

He points to alcoves along Main Street that can house

things like a school radio station he dubs "Wolfpack Live," and notes one of the things the pandemic showed is that the district can draw a virtual audience beyond students and staff, so any broadcasts in the school could be streamed online.

The new classrooms are deliberately built to keep the student count at 24 or lower but have the technology to project work from student laptops to whiteboards, or to

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## Education

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show remote teachers or students on the boards while built in cameras can capture classroom work to live-stream online.

The stage sits connected to a series of rooms designed for music and choral practice, the center of the district's Creative and Performing Arts Academy. Recording and playback ability is built into the larger and smaller practice rooms.

Along with the option of turning part of Main Street into a sort of "sidewalk cafe" for the cafeteria, the new school will also have access to an outdoor patio for dining in warm weather. Each classroom wing has a flex room at one end for small student gatherings. Costello is particularly proud of the rooms that will house the district's STEM Academy, long confined to antiquated space in the basement of Meyers High School. There will be state-of-the-art labs for different sciences, 3D printers and an engineering room.

There are also plans to make a third academy, for business, complete with a stock market ticker board akin to those found in local college business programs.

Costello predicts that, while the technology adopted during the pandemic will be incorporated into classrooms, there won't be a big shift



A rendering of a commons area that will be part of a 37,000-square-foot expansion at Bear Creek Community Charter school, to accommodate about 25 new students in each grade from kindergarten through eighth.



LIU Executive Director Tony Grieco shows off the large garage that will be converted into warehouse space and a job-training facility for special education students transitioning out of school

to remote-only options. The design is intended to make in-person learning more attractive thanks to all the new equipment and collaborative space.

While the new high school is the biggest change coming, there are two other major renovations reshaping local education this year, and they have the potential to impact students from many districts.

The Luzerne Intermediate Unit acquired the former U.S. Army Reserve building on Route 315 near the North Cross Valley Expressway. Renovations are underway to consolidate several special education services in differ-

ent locations in what will be called the "Lighthouse Academy."

Executive Director Tony Grieco showed off the progress recently, with classrooms being carved out for students needing academic and emotional support, as well as for three rooms for students needing "partial hospitalization" services.

Grieco notes the location will make it easier for member school districts to get students to the center. Behavioral Health Services Director Jennifer Runquist said it will include full-time mental health staff in the classrooms, a "calming space" for students to

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Mark Guydish | Times Leader





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## Education

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“self-regulate and re-focus,” counseling and medical management.

The goal, Runquist added, is to help students develop coping mechanisms so they can return to their home districts. The space is big enough to start out with about 150 students, but offers enough room to expand to about 180.

Grieco also showed off a capacious garage big enough to become the LIU warehouse and hold the Document Destruction Depot, a job training site for special education students transitioning out of school that is currently housed in rented space in Plymouth.

The third big change is at



Mark Guydish | Times Leader

**Workers, including one on stilts, install drywall in the former U.S. Army Reserve Building on Route 315. The building is being converted into classroom and other space for the Luzerne Intermediate Unit, which will be consolidating several programs into the new site.**

Luzerne County's only brick and mortar charter school, Bear Creek Community Charter. It's expanding to hold one additional section of each grade, from kindergarten

through eighth.

“The expansion is adding 37,000 square feet,” Chief Executive Office Jim Smith said, noting the move actually meets the plans of the original

charter approved when the school first opened, which had projected three sections of every grade housing up to 75 students per grade instead of the current 40.

“The pandemic was irrelevant” to the expansion, Smith said, though the initial addition of two classrooms over the past year went a long way in keeping students in the school by providing enough space to maintain social-distancing.

Unlike most local public school districts, Bear Creek already had enough computer devices for each student before the pandemic, so going to remote learning at the start of the pandemic didn't require a major investment in equipment. Teachers, however, had scant experience in remote

teaching. “There was a transition where there were struggles.”

Now that the Bear Creek, like most local schools, is equipped and trained for remote-only learning, Smith said some aspects of that technology will be incorporated into classrooms moving forward. But he said Bear Creek may not legally be allowed to offer much in the way of cyber learning, because it is chartered for in-person classes. He also said their's little interest in doing so even if allowed by law. In fact, the school is planning to “implement a hands-on, lab-oriented science curriculum” once expansion is completed and the pandemic restrictions are fully lifted.

Reach Mark Guydish at 570-991-6112 or on Twitter @TLMarkGuydish



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# PSU WB training future entrepreneurs

By Jerry Lynott

jlynott@timesleader.com

The human component has been front and center in the previous three industrial revolutions. And in the latest iteration, Industry 4.0, it's still there.

The roles of men and women aren't subservient to machines. Quite the opposite, they're inter-related and the human touch is even more critical in smart manufacturing marked by data driven automation to do the heavy lifting and repetitive tasks.

A new program at Penn State Wilkes-Barre aims to prepare students to chart their own course as entrepreneurs and navigate the route from process to product.

The school is in the midst of re-imagining and re-envisioning the focus of its IDEA Hub in the Innovation Center in downtown Wilkes-Barre. The Center has a number of partners involved in small business development, said Stephanie Gresh, an assistant teaching professor in the business department of PSU-WB.

"We're trying to complement their work and in complementing their work, we're really focusing on Industry 4.0," Gresh said.

As part of the Invent Penn State initiative for innovation and entrepreneurship, the PSU-WB campus is focusing on



Times Leader file photo

The Penn State Wilkes-Barre is located in Lehman Township in the Back Mountain.

education and networking opportunities around Industry 4.0, Gresh said.

"The big thing we're working on now is, obviously, the rebranding of this and the introduction of this into the (Invent Penn State) ecosystem which would really kick off with a summit we're going to be hosting a year from this summer," Gresh said.

The date and location are still to be determined.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, the PSU program emphasizes the use of available technologies in Industry 4.0 for specific smart-technology manufacturing application.

"I think a lot of times people think they have to come up with the next best app, the next best technology. The truth is there's so many that are out there already. It's more about what ones should I bundle together to be the best for what I'm doing," Gresh said.

Cost and efficiency still are factors that have to be considered when choosing a technology. Big data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence and automation drive business these days. But technology does not stand alone.

"You have to have the

right mindset to know how to utilize these technologies and know how to work together in teams to come up with the next step," Gresh said. "You have to have an entrepreneurial mindset. That's the term that's being thrown out there, an innovative mindset, an entrepreneurial mindset."

Penn State has been laying the foundation for students through its Entrepreneurship and Innovation minor. The ENTI program, included in the New Ventures Cluster, was launched in 2012, said Terry Clemente, an assistant teaching profes-

sor of business at PSU-WB. Clemente, who also serves as the coordinator for the Business Program and Business Internship, has been teaching the "Managing an Entrepreneurial Start-Up" course.

It's designed for students "to understand the challenges faced by entrepreneurs as they launch and grow a company," Clemente said. In their project-based study, teams of students apply the classroom learning to "the real-world situation" by researching and interviewing a local entrepreneur, she said.

The course requires

the students to "write a one-page case study and design a digital interactive infographic highlighting the steps taken and resources utilized during the growth," Clemente said.

The teaching approach for the course will be showcased at Penn State Symposium for Teaching and Learning with Technology to be held virtually in May.

Each revolution revolves around the same thing, providing a product or service to the consumer, Gresh noted.

"We are actually no different now than we were in the 1800s. It's just a matter of what we are doing, how we get at that same end goal," Gresh said. People have been choosing the online route over the physical act of shopping in a brick and mortar store.

The two options will be available, although in a complementary marketplace. People will still seek out the socialization and interaction stores provide, Gresh said. Without a customized approach to the customer, a store isn't likely to stay competitive.

"Eventually, I'd imagine that's going to be a virtual reality you could watch in a store before you even decide to go to that store and then you go to the store," Gresh said.

Reach Jerry Lynott at 570-991-6120 or on Twitter @TLJerryLynott.



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# Misericordia investing in its future

By Jerry Lynott

jlynott@timesleader.com

It should be easy to find the science building on the campus of Misericordia University.

The sign for the Frank M. and Dorothea Henry Science Center should do it. Otherwise, look for a something brand new.

The school renovated the existing building and added onto it making the center the largest academic edifice at the school. The combined price tag was \$35 million and well worth from the point of view of David Rehm, Ph.D., vice president of Academic Affairs.

The Henry Science Center was among the new and significant developments Rehm recently shared.

"It's really a game changer in terms of our work in the natural sciences," Rehm said.

The school embarked on the capital investment years ago and planning and fundraising began under the previous president Thomas Botzman who was on campus from July 2013 through June 2020.

The addition was completed last fall and the refurbished building has been cleared for occupancy. They've been fitted with flexible classrooms, laboratories and high-tech equipment so the faculty can prepare students for careers in nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy among others.

"I think it's reflective of our strength in health sciences and the kind of background in biology and chemistry and physics that all of our students and especially those students in health sciences require," Rehm



Submitted photo

Frank M. and Dorothea Henry Science Center at Misericordia University in Dallas Township.

said.

The center was in the right place at the right time for the COVID-19 pandemic. The school instituted a COVID-19 testing program. At the start of the semester students began surveillance testing for the community.

"Anybody who comes to campus and is on campus any reasonable time, we're testing them. And we've done random testing over the first nine weeks of the semester. We have our own lab in the new Henry Science Center where we process the test. And we have same day results of the test," Rehm said.

Next semester the center will welcome students who enroll in the new environmental studies program.

Designed by Misericordia's philosophy and biology faculty with help from other disciplines, the program is multidisciplinary. There's a reason the program draws from a number of sources.

"Because we think that issues of the environment are related to more than just science. They're related to society as a whole. They involve questions about how we view the earth around us, how we want to interact with it, how we want to preserve and sustain it," Rehm said.

"And those are issues that involve everything from philosophy to religion to literature to history, all of those are relevant, in addition to having a stronger understanding of, if you will, the scientific com-

ponents of the kind of global challenges we face in terms of the environment."

The region offers itself for study with its anthracite history, the ongoing natural gas exploration and the Susquehanna River, Rehm pointed out.

There's another connection too.

"And if you recall Misericordia was founded by the Sisters of Mercy. And the Sisters themselves have what they call critical concerns, issues and areas that they are focused on as an order. And certainly one of them is care of the earth," Rehm said.

The environmental studies program ties in nicely, Rehm said.

"We believe in the need to



Rehm

work toward the sustainability of life and support movements and legislation that secure the fundamental right to water for everyone, and that

address climate change," the Sisters stated in their concern for the earth.

The program will be available this fall. It should be another three years before the first students graduate with degrees in environmental studies, Rehm said.

Also new in the fall semester is a special, integrative studies program for students with moderate autism, with or without co-morbid disorders and with or without intellectual disability, Rehm said.

The idea going forward is to create a full-time, two-year certificate program. The beginning focus will be on early childhood education and the liberal arts.

"But really what we want to do is prepare these students for independent living and gainful employment while they're learning some academic material and social skills," Rehm said.

It's in line with the Sisters' critical concerns of earth, immigration, nonviolence, racism and women., Rehm said.

"As a Catholic school our focus is on each individual human being and the dignity and worth that he or she brings to our society," Rehm said.

Reach Jerry Lynott at 570-991-6120 or on Twitter @TLJerryLynott.



# King's, with new president coming, adapts to changes

By Mark Guydish

mguydish@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — Teaching students via Zoom from a hospital bed while the nurses put a “do not disturb, class in progress” sign on the door? Well, it may or may not be the future of higher education at King's College, but it's already the past.

Outgoing President The Rev. Jack Ryan cited the unusual case of business Professor Christopher Alexander teaching from a hospital room as memorable demonstration of the COVID-19 pandemic impact. Alexander had been put in a private room for observation following a procedure, but figured as long as he had his laptop and a web connection, there was no reason to skip his scheduled 9:30 a.m. class.

“The pandemic was a natural experiment,” Ryan said. “So everyone had to pivot in four days or less, including this president, and learn what this online world is like.”

The “this president” part is worth noting. Ryan is stepping down, and The Rev. Tom Looney will fill the post.

Along with investing heavily in technology to teach online, King's also invested in a new interactive Barco weConnect virtual system within the McGowan School of Business.

“It's very large moni-



Submitted photo

King's College has added a stock “ticker board” to the McGowan School of Business. Submitted photo



Looney

Ryan

tors,” Ryan said. “Texas A&M came to do seminars in that room and were very impressed. They are going to adopt the technology.”

For King's, the system could mean long-distance collaborations with other schools, expanding student options.

Despite the giant tech steps forced by the pandemic, Ryan sees remote access as a supplement, not a substitute. “There are a lot of ways to enhance learning with in-class technology,” he said. “But we also learned the vast majority of students aren't interested in online learning. They are willing to do it over winter break or in summer, but overwhelmingly prefer face-to-face education.”

Coaching and motivation are integral to

a college's success in preparing students, and doing that on a Zoom call with a lot of participants can be challenging, Ryan said. He likened it to a big university with a class of 200 students in a large room. “If you were sitting in the back of the lecture hall, that was the original distance learning.”

Remote connections go well beyond class lessons from hospital beds. Looney noted that, while the preference is still to have in-person meetings

with students on other services like academic advising, tutorial services and non-teaching matters, the expanded ability to conduct such meetings remotely can be a big convenience for students, especially those living off campus.

“It helps students with time issues. It helps some students who are more comfortable with online interaction,” Looney said. Another pandemic-induced technology sure to remain: “We will keep online bookings

for appointments.

Ryan noted food service changed in a way that's likely to continue. “They have apps to order now, and students like that. It's changing the way they are dining, for better or worse.”

Ryan predicted curriculum changes may be big in the longer term. “I'm noticing students and their parents are starting to look for COVID-proof careers.” Students want jobs that have flexible remote work options that

See KING'S | 25



## King's

From page 24

wouldn't be disrupted by another pandemic.

And he suspects there will be a big surge in health majors in a few years. Ryan cites "a theory that when you are 11, 12, 13 and 14 years old, you form your world view." He notes many children that age during the 2008-09 recession grew up fiscally conservative, avoiding big debts after seeing the financial struggles of parents who lost their jobs.

"It wouldn't surprise me if we see more of this generation moving into the health profession," he

predicted.

King's is already positioned to expand health programs. Ryan said that while details aren't worked out, plans for the former Times Leader building the college bought on South Main Street call for setting up "allied health services" programs in it.

Ryan doesn't see any other major changes in the next year or so. "We bit off an awful lot," he said, referring to new engineering programs, as well as recent building purchases and renovations.

"If you are going to do something distinctive, it's going to be big, expensive and difficult to replicate," Ryan said. "It

has to add value to the community and to your students."

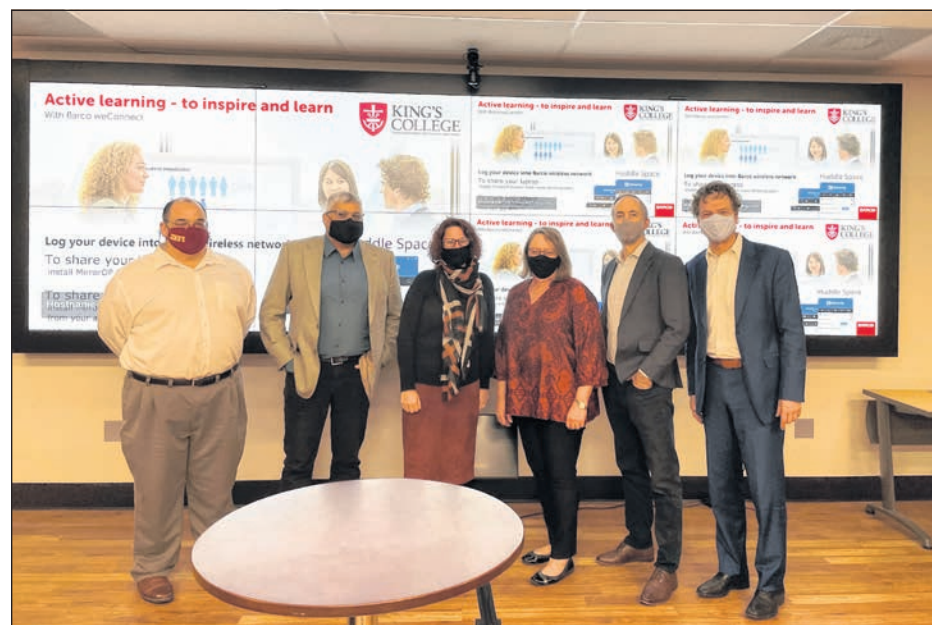
So what does that leave Looney with as incoming president?

"He has to pay for it," Ryan laughed.

Getting more serious, both men saw a smooth transition as to Looney's presidential tenure.

"Father Tom and I have known each other a long time," Ryan said. "He sits on our management team. He's been in on all the conversations the last couple of years, so he's familiar with the strategies and methods of the college."

Reach Mark Guydish at 570-991-6112 or on Twitter @TLMarkGuydish



King's College's recent addition of a Barco weConnect virtual classroom was used for an interactive leadership program with people from Texas A&M University and other organizations. King's President The Rev. Jack Ryan touts the room as one of many tech innovations reshaping education. From left, Raymond Pryor of King's College, Greg Marchi of Texas A&M, Jennifer Haddy of MDA Leadership Consulting, Kim Stuphen of Texas A&M, Jim Laughlin of MDA, and Maarten Asser of Culture Learning Group.

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# At LCCC, necessary changes and improvements

By Bill O'Boyle

boboyle@timesleader.com

NANTICOKE — At Luzerne County Community College, President Thomas Leary said there have been many changes/improvements made as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

And Leary said one thing is certain — LCCC will always do whatever it takes to provide and enhance their students' experience.

For instance, Leary said the college has done all it can to "flatten the curve" for the LCCC community:

- Assistance to students, such as computers provided to students in need
- Online tutoring
- Virtual learning
- More variations of how classes are offered
- New plans for instructional delivery
- Enhancement of current delivery systems

"Many new online and virtual courses are being offered," Leary said. "Modifications have been made to existing classrooms in order to create larger instructional spaces and adherence to social distancing guidelines."

Leary said office waiting areas have been rearranged or expanded and cough/sneeze shields have been installed throughout the campus.

"Frequently touched surfaces are being cleaned multiple times



Times Leader file photo

Luzerne County Community College President Thomas Leary.

during the workday and sanitizing wipes and hand sanitizer are available throughout campus, including building entrances, common areas and instructional spaces," Leary said, adding that virtual tours and virtual open houses have been held as needed.

Leary added, "Our grading policy will remain in effect so students will have the option to transition most general courses and free electives into a passing (P) grade or a with-

drawal (W) at the end of the course. This option allows students to maintain their efforts to the end of the semester, and once grades are submitted, decide if they would rather receive the passing (P) grade instead of a traditional letter grade, or even to withdraw from the course."

Leary explained that a passing grade signifies that students received a C or better, but will not contribute toward grade point average (GPA). He said students also have

the option to request an incomplete (I) grade. An incomplete is an option for most courses and will require a plan for completing course requirements beyond the end of the semester.

New procedures at LCCC during the pandemic include:

- 50/50 in-person vs. virtual/online learning
- Esports program in development
- Hazleton Center expansion - new student services area; three new classrooms for spring

2021, two more new classrooms for fall 2021

- Potential expansion of Head Start centers at campus locations

- New science lab at Greater Susquehanna Center (in progress)

- Potential expansion of Wilkes-Barre Center

Leary said LCCC had a 90% increase in distance education enrollment for the fall 2020 semester.

"Spring semester classes began on Monday, Feb. 1, at the main campus and all off-campus centers, except for

the Wilkes-Barre Center, which began on Monday, Feb. 15," Leary said. "In-person classes, online classes, and hybrid options are being offered this semester."

Leary said in-person classes are being offered and student activities are resuming.

"Many student activities are online, but college clubs are meeting again on campus, following social distancing guidelines," Leary said.

Reach Bill O'Boyle at 570-991-6118 or on Twitter @TLBillOBoyle.





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# Pandemic helped Wilkes prep for future

By Mark Guydish

mguydish@timesleader.com

After a year of dealing with the first pandemic in more than a century, Wilkes University emerged better prepared for the shifting landscape of higher education's future, the school's vice-president of enrollment services believes.

"I think our student expectations will permanently change on how we deliver curriculum and services, and what they expect," Kishan Zuber said.

Like education systems at all levels, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close in March of 2020, Wilkes faced the need for an "urgent adaptation to just survive and deliver our product," Zuber said. "I believe that is going to turn into preparation for the future of higher education."

She rattled off some of the new ways of doing things, spawned initially by the proverbial "necessity is the mother of invention" but now becoming the norm.

- While colleges and universities had already been increasing online class options, the pandemic accelerated the ability to provide it. "Even after we head back into face-to-face learning, we will still have demand for hybrid and online learning. I think they will merge together," she

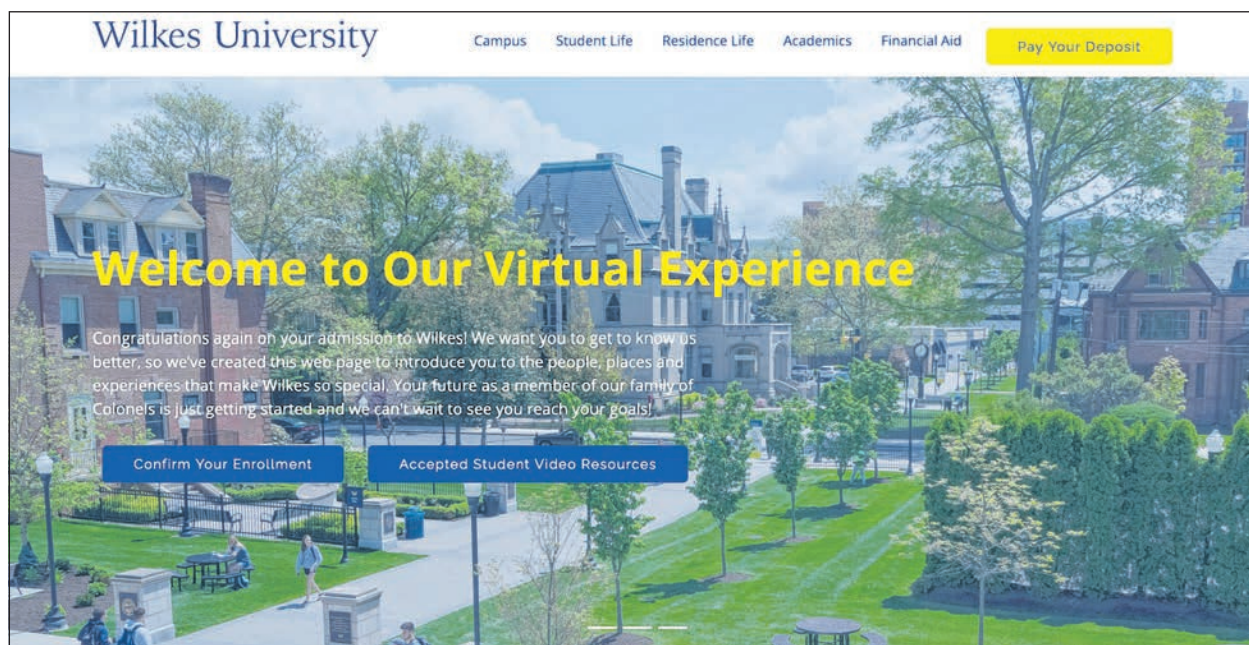


Zuber

said. "I think those two things will co-exist."

- Recruitment of new students evolved rapidly with the need to restrict college visits, and "I can't imagine we'll just abandon what innovations we came up with. We'll resume in-person recruitment, but we will also leverage virtual alongside that," she said. "You can visit a campus, but you are only there about an hour and half. But they can dig in online. We revised the virtual process to give them more information. I think we have more exposure, more video assets, more ways of getting in front of students."

- To use online resources more effectively, "we created an experience page, walking tours, some sample classes," and other resources, all of which use the online linking ability to let students zero in on the right web page when they want to learn more. "It's not just a live, hour-long program of what we



A Screen Shot of Wilkes University's new virtual experience page, one of many changes to improve remote and online services because of the pandemic but likely to become a permanent feature at the school

think they need to know. They can access a lot of information if they want to."

- Arguably, one of the biggest changes moving forward may be the ability to do a lot of non-class stuff online, reducing the need to schedule in-person meetings — particularly useful to incoming students in things like financial aid, registration and other student services. "In financial aid, we are definitely doing more online, verifying signatures online, offering live chat services."

- Wilkes has also started taking advantage of advancements in artificial intelligence and the use of "chat bots," an automated form of assistance when live assistance may not be neces-

sary. "It will be a mixture of both," she said. The chat bot "has 30,000 answers in it," and if the right one doesn't come up quickly, an option to connect to a live person will be available.

- Artificial intelligence is also helping screen applicants. While not the final word, a program can be given "a million behavioral points" such as how often a potential student visits, how they interact via email or text, how close they live to campus and many others, giving some early clues on how well a student may do if offered an acceptance letter.

"We have 30,000 inquiries a year, sometimes 50,000 people say 'I'm interested in Wilkes'," she said. "We can't have

an hour-long talk with 50,000 students. We use technology to narrow it down."

Online access has become so widespread and so expected that Wilkes will soon launch "a brand new website, all mobile," Zuber said. "Pages are easily viewed, the site is more responsive. It's a complete redesign."

The traditional importance of standardized tests — SAT and ACT exams — in admissions has taken a bit of a hit due to the pandemic. Wilkes, like most colleges and university, waived the need for such test results in applications last year in large part because it was so hard for students to arrange to take the tests as the

pandemic shut everything down.

"We made the decision to do that again next fall," Zuber said, adding that the tests had already lost some cache in judging potential students, with schools relying on a wider range of information, including high school GPA, class rank, the high school itself, and the number of Advanced Placement or honors courses taken.

"People are going to take the really great ideas and keep using and improving them," she predicted. "As bad as the pandemic was, it compelled people to come up with new ways of doing things."

Reach Mark Guydish at 570-991-6112 or on Twitter @TLMarkGuydish



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# Pennsylvania manufacturers answered the call

By Bill O'Boyle

boboyle@timesleader.com

Eric Joseph Esoda, president & CEO at the Northeastern Pennsylvania Industrial Resource Center (NEPIRC), said despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Pennsylvania manufacturers still managed to increase sales, create jobs and invest in expansion.

"A little over a year ago, our region, our state and our nation were faced with a nemesis that was an entirely different type of battle than any war or defense situation we've known," Esoda said. "The COVID-19 pandemic caught our world, state and communities off-guard as we struggled to confront a threat that was unknown, invisible and deadly."

While healthcare providers, first responders, medical researchers and charitable organization workers unquestionably served as frontline fighters in this unprecedented war, Esoda said the critical role of Pennsylvania manufacturers should also be recognized.

As the nation's sixth largest state in terms of medical device employment, with more than 418 firms and a multitude of suppliers within that sector, Esoda said the nation looked to Pennsylvania's industrial base for leadership



Times Leader file photo

**Eric Joseph Esoda, President & CEO at the Northeastern Pennsylvania Industrial Resource Center (NEPIRC).**

amidst this medical crisis.

"True to form, our manufacturing community did not disappoint," Esoda said. "Throughout the pandemic, more than 8,200 Pennsylvania manufacturers and their 370,000 employees remained operational and continued to produce goods that our domestic economy and citizens needed to remain viable."

Esoda said food, beverage, paper, plastic packaging and chemical plants kept products on store shelves while advanced electronics, HVAC equipment, medical device, aerospace parts, machine parts and forging facilities continued to produce goods critical to other industries and essential to our everyday lives.

"Many small and mid-sized manufacturers

quickly transitioned to produce medical supplies and products needed for the fight against COVID-19 while also fulfilling existing customer demand for their core products," Esoda said.

Esoda said Gentex Corporation, a Carbon-dale-based manufacturer of advanced helmet systems for the Department of Defense, emergency response and industrial safety sectors, expanded

its production capacity and introduced the Pureflo 3000 — a fully-integrated respirator and face shield. He said the company also pivoted to produce a variety of other protective hoods, shields and eyeglasses.

Similarly, i2M, an advanced polymer film manufacturer in Mountain Top, converted its production lines to manufacture a specialized anti-microbial gown

appropriate for general and high-risk healthcare settings.

Hayward Laboratories, located in East Stroudsburg, successfully integrated a line of hand sanitizers into their production schedule, while Martz Technologies expanded its facility in Berwick to facilitate the manufacture of face masks using antibacteri-

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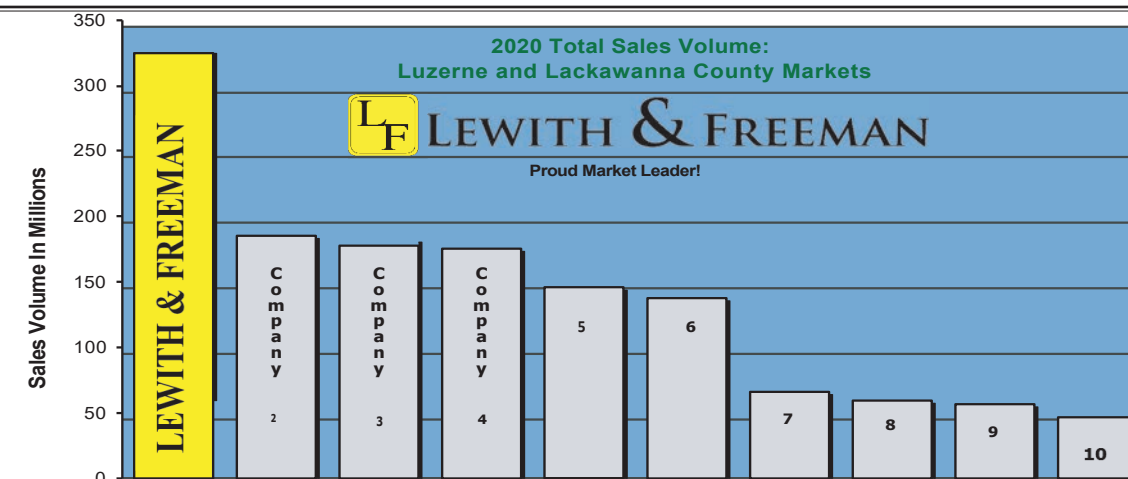
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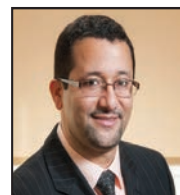
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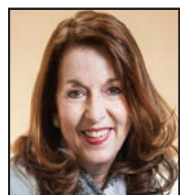
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\$3,067,300 Volume Sold



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\$3,008,500 Volume Sold



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\$2,990,900 Volume Sold



**Linda Gavio**  
\$2,845,300 Volume Sold



**Christine Lacomas**  
\$2,778,500 Volume Sold



**Carrole Kite**  
\$2,586,200 Volume Sold



**Michael Szustak**  
\$2,558,100 Volume Sold



**Tina Aquilina**  
\$2,361,300 Volume Sold



**Lindsey Maiolatesi**  
\$2,239,800 Volume Sold



**Michele Hopkins**  
\$2,220,400 Volume Sold



**Chelsea Sidari**  
\$2,108,700 Volume Sold



**Terry Nelson**  
\$1,861,900 Volume Sold



**Cheryl Roman**  
\$1,686,200 Volume Sold



**Ann Lewis**  
\$1,513,000 Volume Sold



**Keri Gera**  
\$1,409,000 Volume Sold



**Kelly Jacoby**  
\$1,349,700 Volume Sold



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\$1,314,900 Volume Sold



**Lori Jewett**  
\$1,283,800 Volume Sold



**Regina Petronio**  
\$1,279,400 Volume Sold



**Gerald Palermo**  
\$1,206,800 Volume Sold



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# Law firm adapted to meet needs of clients

## Specializing in elder law, Colbert & Grebas face unique challenges during pandemic

By Elizabeth Baumeister  
For Times Leader

When the COVID-19 pandemic swooped in more than a year ago, businesses and professionals around the world were hit with an array of new challenges. For partners Brenda Colbert and Kevin Grebas, of Colbert & Grebas, P.C., that meant getting creative when it came to meeting with clients.

The firm, which specializes in elder law, has two locations: one in Kingston and the other in Moosic. While a waiver from Gov. Tom Wolf allowed the practice to remain open at its physical locations, they did not hold in-person meetings with clients at the beginning of the pandemic.

"We immediately implemented several changes to protect our staff and our clients," Grebas said, adding that most of the firm's nine-person full-time and two-person part-time staff members worked from home, and client meetings were conducted via teleconference or the online platform Zoom.

"That was really different," he said. "We're used to meeting people face to face in our conference room, really getting to know our clients. So It was quite a big adjust-



Submitted photo

Brenda Colbert and Kevin Grebas, of Colbert & Grebas, P.C.

ment. ... But thankfully, it did work very well for us."

In some cases such as with clients in long-term care, however, telephone and video conferences weren't going to cut it.

"If we had a client who was admitted to a nursing facility, and it was necessary for that client to execute a legal document such as a power of attorney or will, we simply couldn't do that,"

Grebas said. "Throughout the pandemic, though, we were able to work with facilities to come up with some innovative methods of meeting with clients."

Sometimes that meant standing outside a window.

"They [the clients] would be placed in a room on the first floor, and we would talk to them over the phone," he said. "As long as we

could witness them signing the documents and speak with them to be sure that they understood what they were signing, we could allow them to sign. So we were able to find ways to still allow our clients to execute the documents, but it certainly wasn't easy."

### A unique practice

As an elder law firm, Colbert & Grebas, P.C., is hyper focused on

issues affecting people age 55 and older. Both attorneys are certified in elder law, meaning they have been recognized by the National Elder Law Foundation and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court as experts in the field. According to Grebas, there are only 70 lawyers with this certification in the state and only a few in this region.

The firm has been in practice since August of

2012, but both Colbert and Grebas have been practicing exclusively in elder law since 2002.

Grebas explained the practice of elder law breaks down into several areas such as estate planning, estate administration and long-term care planning.

"I would say the thing that sets us apart from most others is our focus on long-term care planning," Grebas said. "We assist clients in protecting their home and life savings from costs associated with long-term care and nursing homes."

### Here for the community

Another aspect that sets the firm apart is its community involvement. Whether donating funds to local organizations, volunteering their time to area service projects or hosting free seminars, Colbert & Grebas and its staff members are always finding ways to give back.

"We are local," Grebas said. "My partner Brenda [Colbert] and I are both from northeastern Pennsylvania, and we really feel that it's important to give back to this community. We try to get into the community and volunteer, donate our time and resources as much as possible."

See CLIENTS | 37



## Call

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al fabric (X-Static) made in Noble Biomaterial's Scranton plant. In their quest to manufacture over one million masks, Martz Technologies created more than 100 new jobs for the region.

While many manufacturers modified their processes and production lines to contribute to the fight against COVID-19, Esoda said others already in the medical device and equipment supply chain increased their output to meet growing demand, like Proctor & Gamble (Mehoopany), Pride Mobility (Duryea), Golden Technologies (Old Forge), Intermetro (Wilkes-Barre), PF Nonwovens (Hazleton) and many others, rose to the occasion.

In fact, according to the NEPIRC, which serves the aforementioned companies and other small to mid-sized manufacturers within central, northeastern and northern Pennsylvania, the organization's manufacturing clients realized \$95.5 million of new and retained sales and \$12.6 million of cost savings as direct results of NEPIRC's consultative services throughout 2020.

Those impacts allowed NEPIRC's clients to create and retain 1,113 manufacturing jobs during the year and invest more than \$14.9 million in regional expansion,

modernization and workforce training. This recently released data was cited within an annual report obtained from third-party administered surveys distributed to 111 companies that utilized NEPIRC's services throughout 2019 and 2020.

Based upon actual company feedback, more than two-thirds of NEPIRC clients experienced cost savings as a beneficial outcome of working with NEPIRC to improve productivity, reduce waste and address persistent production challenges. The average level of annual cost savings reported was \$187,302.

Nearly 40% of all NEPIRC clients experienced revenue increases by working with NEPIRC to increase production capacity, identify new markets, innovate new products and increase market share. The average level of client sales growth was \$558,407.

"To have these dramatic impacts, particularly in the areas of sales growth and job creation within our clients, amidst the challenges of a pandemic is a great testament to the expertise of our team here at NEPIRC and the resiliency and strength of our region's manufacturers," Esoda said. "Much like many of its manufacturing clients, NEPIRC remained operational throughout the pandemic as an essential business enterprise."

As we continue

to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, Esoda said the ability of Pennsylvania manufacturers to adapt to changing business conditions, innovate new products, modify existing processes and work flows and efficiently bring new products to market is proving to be a key contributor to success.

### About NEPIRC

NEPIRC is a not-for-profit organization that has been providing world-class professional services exclusively to manufacturers throughout northeastern and northern Pennsylvania since 1988.

NEPIRC works with manufacturing clients on consultative engagements designed to address their unique challenges and maximize their profitability.

NEPIRC's staff of professional business advisors and highly-qualified specialists design customized solutions for NEPIRC clients that enable them to adopt industry best practices, implement next generation manufacturing strategies, achieve profitable growth, successfully enter new markets and innovate new products and, ultimately, achieve profitability levels that exceed industry benchmarks.

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Silver Springs Ranch has been welcoming equestrian owners since mid-2016 when business partners, Ken Churchill and Ronald Walsh, began revitalization efforts on the property. Courtesy of Ronald Walsh.

# Silver Springs Ranch: More Than Racing

By Maria DiBuo  
mdibuo@timesleader.com

**HARVEYS LAKE** — Nestled in the Harveys Lake community of Wyoming County is Silver Springs Ranch, an equestrian center which focuses on the raising and training of Standardbred horses for harness racing and related competition.

Silver Springs, formerly operating under the previous ownership of 5R Ranch, has been welcoming horses and their owners since mid-2016, when then-owner, Ken Churchill, began

revitalization efforts on the property. Within the year, Churchill went into partnership with Ronald Walsh Jr., a former employee of 5R and equestrian professional. For Walsh, his involvement in horse racing and the Silver Springs Ranch was motivated by time spent with his father, who was heavily involved in Western riding.

Currently, Silver Springs Ranch is overseen by Walsh and the Churchill family following Ken's COVID-19 related passing in Dec. of 2020.

"It's been a little bit of a hit getting back into the swing of things since that

happened, but we're firing all eight cylinders," explained Walsh. "Horses are coming in, they're training and everybody is doing well."

In regard to horse training, the facility is equipped with an 80-foot-wide, half-mile training facility, catering to those preparing for competition-style racing. Being a roughly two-hour drive from the major hubs of Philadelphia and New York City, Silver Springs is strategically positioned to make travel and transportation for horses and their owners as simple as possible.

Cienteles of Silver Springs Ranch

are known to travel as close as Mohegan Sun in Wilkes-Barre and as far as Saratoga Springs, N.Y., for races, making the year-round facility an asset to equestrian owners, as well as those in the community.

Additionally, the ranch offers a five-horse jogging wheel and an eight-horse training wheel to keep horses active during bouts of inclement weather. Looking toward the future, Silver Springs is planning to incorporate more innovative practices in regard to





Submitted photo

Pictured is the Henry/Kuzma wedding held in Oct. of 2020. Courtesy of Ronald Walsh, photography by Franko Photography.

## Racing

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the training of it's horses, including a new barn and swimming pool.

While the facility is largely focused on equestrian training, Silver Springs Ranch also offers a public water facility for the purchasing of natural spring water, in addition to a venue for wedding events — a new addition to the ranch's business model.

"We just got started last year and are in the process of doing better things as far as wedding venues are concerned," said Walsh. "The weddings we held last year went very well. We started out by just doing tents, but are looking into putting in a structure, like a pavilion, for weddings."

For those in the community, Silver Springs Ranch is also planning a two-day fair race with the Pennsylvania Harness Association for the

current year, with the hope of raising donations for the United Way of Wyoming and Luzerne Counties.

"Anything we can do to help out, we do," said Walsh.

Silver Springs is currently taking reservations for wedding events, as well as equestrian training. Individuals interested in learning more can receive more information by contacting Walsh at [ron@silverspringsranch.net](mailto:ron@silverspringsranch.net) or visiting [silverspringsranch.net](http://silverspringsranch.net).

## Clients

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Prior to the pandemic, the attorneys hosted monthly seminars, usually at local restaurants, alternating between Luzerne and Lackawanna counties.

"One of our missions at Colbert & Grebas is to provide education to the community," Grebas said.

The pandemic put a temporary halt to the seminars, but the attorneys found a way to keep that mission going.

"That's what led to the development of our webinars," Grebas said. "They have been very successful for us. We don't provide them as frequently as we did the seminars, but now we're providing a webinar every other month, and we do have a very decent amount of people who join us."

The next webinar is scheduled for

Saturday, May 22, from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Attendance is free, but registration is required. For more info or to register, call 570-299-7909.

"We're going to be talking about ... what we call 'getting your ducks in a row,'" Grebas said. "People need to make sure their estate plan is in order, and we're also going to discuss with them ways to protect their home and their life savings from future nursing home expenses or even current costs. So, if they have a family member who's currently in a nursing home, how they can protect some of those assets from the cost of that care as well."

He added that, although meeting online isn't the same as meeting in person, the webinars are one more way they were able to adapt amid the pandemic. They look forward to resuming the monthly seminars in the future, but for now are operating on a "wait and see approach," he said.

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# Pittston prepared for post-pandemic life

By Tony Callaio  
For Times Leader

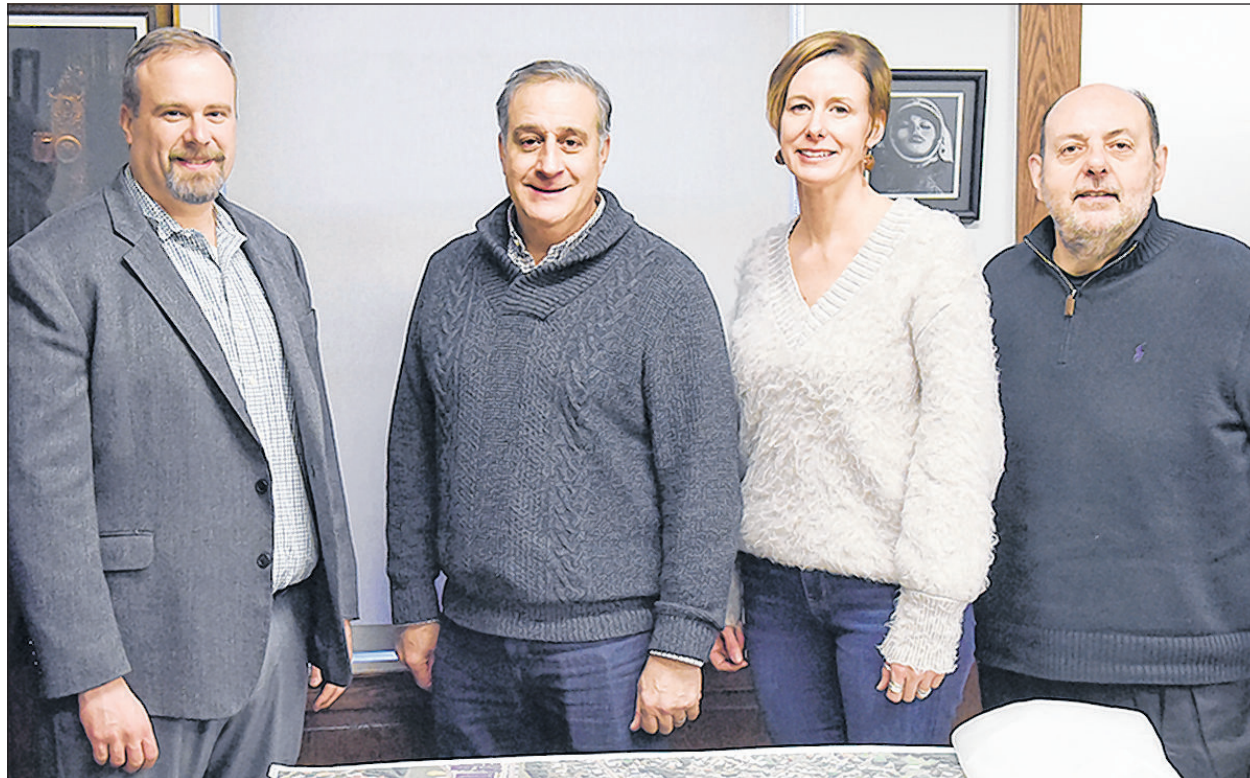
PITTSTON – When every government in the United States shut down in March of 2020 due to the coronavirus, Pittston City Mayor Michael Lombardo did not panic, instead he took advantage of the shutdown to re-evaluate many of the city's programs, fiscal status and overall health.

"One of the things I've been proud of is, we were able to get out quickly in front, in terms of our response municipally," Lombardo said, speaking on the city's initial reaction to the pandemic. "We quickly closed city hall, our parks, and we were able to do that responsibly. That's the benefit of having a facilities department."

The next step was for Lombardo and his team to figure out what the implications of those closures and how it was going to affect the residents and taxpayers of the city.

Everything Lombardo and his staff prepared during the pandemic was to insure a smooth transition to when state and federal officials planned on partially reopening or fully reopening government.

The shutdown was right at the doorstep of collecting taxes for 2020 and the city's administration came up with solutions in receiving those



Tony Callaio file photo | For Times Leader

The City of Pittston Mayor Michael Lombardo, second from left, and his team stand in front of a city map ready to take Pittston to the next level with plans to continue to improve streetscaping, removing blight, increase housing and create a large recreation area. Mayor Lombardo said his team has been key in helping Pittston moving forward during the pandemic. From the left: Joe Chacke, Redevelopment Authority executive director; Lombardo, Mary Kryptavich, Main St. manager; Joe Moskovitz, city administrator. Absent: Jason Klush, city treasurer.



Tony Callaio file photo | For Times Leader

Pittston code enforcement and zoning officer Harry Smith sets up one of the heat sensors that is able to detect body temperatures.

taxes.

"We needed to, more than we normally do, instead of monthly reconciliation of where we are and where we are supposed to be, we went to bi-weekly," Lombardo said. "Dave Hines (Pittston's director of operations) did a great job with monitoring any blips with tax collection falling off."

The city took steps to ensure no downtime with the way their government runs keeping timelines as close to true as possible to create the

least big of interruptions.

"We modified our online portal and (were) able to take payments," Lombardo said. "We had a drop-off box fabricated outside City Hall, and we made sure our phone systems and email systems were in order to handle volume calls and email."

As time went on during the pandemic, Lombardo knew residents would be struggling financially and began plans to take some of the pressure off taxpayers.

"We extended the window of rebate,"

Lombardo added. "That break you get with your taxes was extended longer, and we went through the whole year last year without any penalty phase. Even garbage collection and purchasing garbage stickers, we were flexible."

The mayor gives great credit to the citizens of Pittston for their adaptability and resilience.

"Given our demographics, our residents wouldn't be apt to use online portals, but this has proven that they do and they will, so we need to be better at that and create opportunities for people to do that," Lombardo added. "We're looking at other automations that will virtually allow people to pay most of their bills."

## City changes due to COVID

One big change at City Hall has been the acquisition of an air sanitizing system by AeroClave. According to the city's code enforcement and zoning officer, Harry Smith, AeroClave technology helps control the spread of infection through the air by spraying a chemical mist for approximately 15 minutes into a room, proven effective against MRSA, HIV-1, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, Ebola, MERS, CRE, E. coli, Norovirus, H1N1, Legionella pneumophila, Salmonella,



## Pittston

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Listeria, mold, mildew and more.

"I'm appreciative to (Wilkes-Barre City) Mayor (George) Brown and (Wilkes-Barre Fire Department) Chief (Jay) Delaney," Lombardo said. "They had done a lot of legwork with the AeroClave."

Lombardo said he pulled facilities department employee Jake Berlew into City Hall on a full-time basis to wipe down door handles, and make sure all items touched by hands were cleaned several times a day.



Tony Callaio file photo | For Times Leader  
**The heat sensor fever screening system detects city employee Shiela McGarry's body temperature at 96.4 degrees. T**

"The whole idea of being better at more frequent cleaning of City Hall, not that it's a dirty place, but we're not talking about dirt, we're

talking about germs," Lombardo explained. "The whole idea of cleaning handles and using the AeroClave, we will continue to do that."

Two heat sensors also have been secured. The sensors use an infrared system showing different colors of body heat which would indicate someone has a fever. The unit can scan as many as 10 people at a time.

"We have two base units (heat sensors) as well as a portable that we can take on the road with us," Lombardo said. "Even in flu season, it will be good to deploy those units."

The mayor quickly pointed out that hand sanitizer stations, hand washing stations, the heat sensors and the AeroClave units were purchased through Pittston City's Commu-

nity Development Block Grant program and assistance from the Luzerne County.

Lombardo said residents would no longer be able to go right into the administration office but instead stop at the treasurer's office near the entrance of the building.

Post pandemic, all city parks will be sanitizing equipment as well as routine litter cleanup.

The city has also secured additional hand sanitation stations that will be placed in the city parks.

Lombardo said the facilities department would monitor the stations as well as upkeep of the parks.

### Pittston post-pandemic

"In the future, you're not going to see a lot of structural changes," Lombardo said. "We're not going to close something that we think is high risk. We're not going to alter our playgrounds, but we will just pay more attention in doing that second level of sanitation. The three AeroClave systems will be used extensively like at the library, the ambulance, the fire department and even the police cars."

The mayor is looking into kiosks for people to utilize to pay their bills as well as looking into developing a municipal

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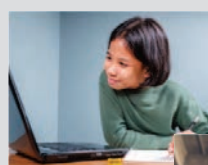


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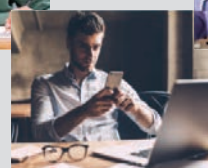
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## Pittston

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drive-thru rotating staff to man the drive-thru.

Lombardo also realized many people work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. while City Hall offices work from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. He is looking into having at least one day per week where City Hall has evening hours for paying taxes or getting garbage stickers.

The mayor said all forms of governments in Luzerne County have opened communications with each other in order to help get through the pandemic. He said he hopes that will continue in the future.

"I hope we continue to communicate between municipalities, between the county like we have been for the last year," Lombardo said. "There's a huge benefit to that, and there's no reason why that should go away when COVID goes away. I don't want us to become isolationists again and look at the map and redraw our lines."

"Overall, I think we fared really well and I attribute that to our staff," Lombardo said. "We have an awesome fire and EMS department that really stayed ahead of the curve."

### Pittston City's future

Mayor Lombardo feels the business model will change as a result of the pandemic whereas Zoom meetings might be the norm in the future as well as during the shutdown.

"We need to make sure

we have technology now more than ever. It's important that we have 5G and 6G and the next things that come and fiber so we can service and do those things," Lombardo said. "From that point, it will be an assessment of infrastructure."

Lombardo feels downtown will have to create more small retail space due to big retail and malls will continue to struggle.

The mayor is hoping the continuing reshaping of the downtown will flourish with additional retail, and extended Main Street streetscaping, new construction of both retail and residential space, the introduction of additional fine arts and cultural events, will make Pittston a true focal point in northeastern Pennsylvania.

"I would give us a steady B+ right through the whole thing, only because we I always think we could do better," Lombardo said. "I think when you give yourself an A or an A+, you say it gives you room to grow and that's an unrealistic for the future."

Lombardo feels the City of Pittston will bounce back once the city can reopen full time and is excited for a recent return of events in city development.

"I don't know what's happened in the last month, but the floodgates have opened up and I can honestly say for the first time, there's a lot of stuff at the table," Lombardo admitted. "I think people are starting to feel a little bit of con-



Three AeroClave air sanitizing systems was acquired by the City of Pittston during the pandemic and will continue to be utilized moving forward. The system controls the spread of airborne infections. The unit shown is sanitizing the air in City Hall chamber hall.

Tony Callaio file photo | For Times Leader

fidence now and are saying, 'Where do we go.'"

According to Lombardo, there is potentially \$20 million worth of construction and work coming into the city.

"A lot of it's realistic and it's happening," Lombardo said. "I think there's a lot of optimistic things to look forward to. When we reopen, we are going to be right there and we're in the best financial shape we've ever been in."

### Greater Pittston Chamber of Commerce reflects on pandemic

"The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 showed us that when the chips are down, the Greater Pittston Business Community steps up," Michelle Mikitish, Greater Pittston Chamber of Commerce executive director, said. "We saw this in the way the entire community recently stepped up when Meals on Wheels of Greater

Pittston put out the call for help."

Mikitish cited when larger employers in Greater Pittston began ordering employee appreciation lunches on a weekly basis from our local restaurants and delis to help keep those businesses afloat.

"We see this in the open lines of communication and the sharing of resources between organizations in an effort keep our employees and

our customers safe," Mikitish said. "These new partnerships will last much longer than the pandemic and will only make our communities safer and stronger."

Mikitish feels Greater Pittston small businesses learned a lot during this pandemic where most businesses rose to the challenge.

"We saw new services like curbside pick-up, online ordering and social media outreach, that will very likely remain a big part of the service industry," Mikitish added. "Outdoor activities became the go-to entertainment for most of us and many places have made long-term investments in outdoor facilities that will be in use for years to come."

Mikitish said she feels confident events will be coming back and in some cases, they will be better than ever.

"The last year has given everyone an opportunity to reevaluate programming, consider alternative solutions and find new ways to connect," Mikitish added. "So many of our Greater Pittston establishments like Pazzo, Merle Norman, Joyce Insurance, Valley Meat & Deli, Sabatelle's, Blue Ribbon, Liberty Tax, First Choice Business Solutions, Pittston Memorial Library, Greater Pittston YMCA, Pittston Popcorn, The Red Mill, Grico's, CEO Foodbank, and Meals on Wheels of Greater Pittston, all weathered the storm during COVID."



# At Coal Creative, it's all about the story

## CEO discusses how pandemic created growth for the company

By Patrick Kernan  
pkernan@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — Located in the heart of downtown Wilkes-Barre, marketing firm Coal Creative is all about one thing, if you ask the business's CEO and owner, Holly Pilcavage, and that's helping clients get their stories out there.

"We're a creative agency, and we fuel story-telling through video, websites, content creation, all of that," she said. "But really what it started as just an opportunity for friends to get together and create, when you really pull back the layers.

"And over the years it's just grown, and we've really stayed true to that," she went on. "We have this incredible team, and I would go as far as saying we're one of the drivers of positivity and creation and, I guess, things that are fueling NEPA now."

But what exactly is Coal Creative? In short, the company aims to become a one-stop-shop for all the marketing needs a local business might have. Whether you need videos, a new website or just development of your brand, Coal Creative says they can be there for you.



Pat Kernan | Times Leader

Holly Pilcavage is owner and CEO of Coal Creative. The marketing company is located in downtown Wilkes-Barre.

Founded as a freelance company in 2010 by Gerard Durling, Coal Creative has grown into something larger and larger as time has gone on, growing from a one-man production to a team of several employees and contracted talent, eventually moving into a large space in the Luzerne Bank building on Public Square in downtown Wilkes-Barre.

But Pilcavage said there is still work to be done.

"We're still in that growth phase," she said. "We're still a small but

growing business."

Some of that growth has been helped, in part, by the realization of how effectively the company can work remotely. Pilcavage said that Coal Creative now employs team members based in both the Philadelphia area and the Pittsburgh area. While these employees are still technically based out of Wilkes-Barre along with all the other employees, the distinction isn't as large as it used to be, since even the local employees are working from home.

During the pandemic,

Coal Creative has also taken on a new role: event planning, of sorts.

"We've made it work, and one of the things that's worked the most. ... We've really helped with a lot of virtual events over the past year with nonprofits and local organizations and have their big galas," she said.

For a number of area nonprofit organizations, like the Wyoming Valley Chamber of Commerce, Coal Creative has turned fundraisers that would typically be focused

around expensive plated dinners and cocktail hours and turned them into sleekly-produced video events that can be streamed online. Pilcavage said these offer a unique fundraising opportunity, as these videos can often reach a wider audience than the number of people who could attend the fundraising dinners.

But Pilcavage said that one of the most interesting ways that the pandemic has affected her team is that it has significantly strengthened their communication skills.

"Our communication, I think, has just gone through the roof. You're not in the same room, you're not able to read body language, you have to pick up the phone, jump on Slack, call a quick meeting, and we can do that from anywhere," she said. "And don't get me wrong; it was hard, it was scary, I didn't know what was going to happen in those first few weeks. ... But it really expanded our minds to, 'We can be based in NEPA, we can love the area and give back to it, but we can also definitely expand where we're servicing.'" Pilcavage said that their team actually managed to grow during the

pandemic, a relatively uncommon position to be in. Currently, all these positions are remote, and she said that the new team members will be more than welcome to grab a desk if they're living in the area once things can safely open up again, but she also said there might not necessarily be an expectation of that.

She thinks that it's possible that the pandemic's lasting effects will change how the business is run, even once it is truly over.

"I don't imagine enforcing, 'You must be back in the office,'" she said. "I love having the physical space ... but at the end of the day, if your productivity is up, let's make it work."

From here, she said the business is in the process of reworking what its five-year plan is, saying COVID-19 significantly disrupted the initial one. But she does see expansion in the future.

"Without giving too much away, we have our plans, we have our goals where we would like to attract clients from," she said. "But our number one priority is never forgetting where we came from. ... And it wouldn't hurt if we expanded, one way or another."





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# Geisinger expanding to meet needs

## Healthcare system footprint, services continue to grow in Wyoming Valley

By Geri Gibbons

For Times Leader

WILKES-BARRE - Geisinger Wyoming Valley continues to expand both its footprint and services to meet the needs of the community.

The healthcare system responds to the needs of patients throughout their lifespan, reflected in the manner of their growth throughout the area.

Recent progress of the healthcare system means not only better treatment in a crisis, but better access to treatment and consistent preventive care.

Dan Landesberg, associate vice president of operations for Geisinger Northeast, recently said he couldn't be prouder to be part of the organization, based on their response to the challenges of the past year, including the courage and hard work of their front line medical staff.

"It's just been an inspiration, and I think that we've done a great job keeping the community safe, our staff safe and most of all educating the public," he said. "And, in some cases, avoiding some of what we saw in other parts of the country."

Landesberg said the hospital system is focus-



Submitted photo

The Wyoming Valley's Frank M. and Dorothea Henry Cancer Center is currently going through an expansion project.

ing on improving access to care and making better health easier.

"That's our vision and our mission that and even during the past year, we've continued to make progress toward

those objectives," he said.

Geisinger also works hard to make quality care affordable for patients.

"In some cases that means coordinating care better, bringing care to

homes and putting it in convenient locations," he said.

### Cancer care close to home

Construction is well under way at the Wyoming Valley's Frank M.

and Dorothea Henry Cancer Center, which will expand the center from 30,000 square feet to nearly 130,000.

The expansion will feature an 18-bed inpatient unit to serve

patients with complex blood cancers, such as leukemia and aggressive lymphomas; specially designed inpatient rooms with HVAC systems

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## Geisinger

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configured to reduce risk of infection and consolidated cancer resources under one roof for patients undergoing chemotherapy, infusion therapy, high-end imaging, labs, clinical trials, and flexible room designs which will adapt to patient needs.

“What this represents is the ability to transform the way cancer care is delivered in this community,” Landesberg said. “It’s really going to be a regional destination for life-saving care, and it’s going to give people the opportunity to get almost all the cancer care they could possibly need here in Northeast Pennsylvania.”

One of the investments the system made recently was a new minimally invasive technology called CyberKnife for highly targeted radiation therapy, previously only available in cities such as Philadelphia and New York.

By making this high-end care and inpatient services available, Geisinger is making it possible for patients to get treatment close to home, where they are more comfortable, and closer to loved ones.

Cancer treatment continues at the site during construction with Geisinger doctors continuing to provide excellent care.

### Interventional stroke program

Geisinger Wyoming

Valley Medical Center is the only Joint Commission certified Comprehensive Stroke Center in Luzerne County, providing care for even the most complex stroke cases, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“We are a comprehensive stroke center and have been for the last two years,” neurologist Dr. Gregory Weiner said. “There are only 150 such centers across the country, and we are one of them.”

A comprehensive stroke center must have specialized cerebrovascular neurosurgeons available and a neuroscience intensive care unit for stroke patients, the latest advanced imaging capabilities available around the clock to help patients with complex stroke cases.

Weiner said Geisinger Wyoming Valley has neurosurgeons that can treat strokes caused by both blockages and bleeding.

“We are extremely busy in this region because, as it stands, there is nothing in this region that can take care of both disease processes,” Weiner said. “We are actually taking care of about a two-and-a-half hour radius at GWV.”

Weiner said that people are often flown in by helicopters from areas such as Binghamton.

“There’s a huge radius that we are treating,” Weiner said.

Geisinger is also doing a lot of research in regard to preventative care and have “sequenced” more than 100,000 patients within

the Geisinger system and looked at their entire genome to assess what genes put them at higher risk for stroke.

“We are one of the largest genome sequencing systems in the world,” Weiner said.

Weiner said Geisinger Wyoming Valley also leads the country in providing treatment for such disorders as brain bleeds and aneurysms.

He said Geisinger Wyoming Valley offers the best and most advanced care in both prevention and treatment of strokes.

### 65 Forward Health Center Information

Stephanie Pacovsky, operations manager at Geisinger’s 65 Forward Health Centers, said the 65 Forward Health Center sites in Luzerne County provide patients 65 and older great access to health care and other services that keep them healthy in the long term.

During the past year, Geisinger has opened two new 65 Forward sites — in Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton — in addition to their Kingston site.

The sites provide a “one stop shop” for patients, who are able not only to see their doctors more regularly and for longer time periods, but also to get lab work done, to exercise and to get to know other participants of the program.

Over the past year, older 65 Forward patients have been taking advantage of telemedi-

See GEISINGER | 47



Submitted photo

The LIFE center in Wilkes-Barre provides support to seniors who want to remain at home.

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The new 14,200-square-foot LIFE center includes primary care services with full exam rooms, recreational space, rehabilitation gym, bathing facilities, a laundry room and a serving kitchen.

## Geisinger

From page 45

cine and prescription delivery, because of the pandemic.

Pacovsky said patients of the program were even provided with access to exercise routines they could do from the safety and comfort of their own home.

But, now, as regulations are lifting, patients are returning to the brick-and-mortar sites to take advantage of everything from longer appointments to exer-

cise to opportunities for socialization.

By addressing chronic conditions in primary care, the program is helping to lessen chances members develop health complications such as stroke, heart attack or other emergencies.

Members of the program have 20 to 25% lower inpatient hospitalizations and reduce emergency room visits by about 45%.

They have better diabetes and blood pressure control. They're meeting or exceeding national benchmarks for Hemoglobin A1C and blood

pressure rates compared to those in traditional primary care settings.

### LIFE Geisinger Wilkes-Barre

A new LIFE Geisinger location at 592 S. Main St., Wilkes-Barre, will replace the current satellite center at Geisinger South, which has about 50 participants. It is scheduled to open some time in April.

The LIFE center provides support to seniors who want to remain at home. LIFE is an acronym for "living independence for the elderly."

LIFE Geisinger offers comprehensive health-

care services provided by physicians, therapists and social workers to meet the medical, social and emotional needs of participants. Services are provided in the participant's own home and through on-site daily care.

The new 14,200-square-foot space includes primary care services with full exam rooms, recreational space, rehabilitation gym, bathing facilities, a laundry room and a serving kitchen.

Capacity increases to about 150 participants at the new location and will have about 50 full-time

employees when in full operation.

Adults must be 55 and eligible for nursing home services to participate in the program.

### Free2BMom provides

Free2BMom continues to provide counseling, social support and medication-assisted treatment for women in recovery during pregnancy and for two years after childbirth.

Free2BMom was established to assist women with opioid use disorder but is now open to women with all substance use disorders.

The program recently received a \$233,000 grant from the AllOne Foundation to increase its capacity in Luzerne County.

Community partnerships are key in making this program a success. Geisinger works with community organizations to help patients with health and social needs such as transportation, job training, legal service, nutrition and exercise.

It assists pregnant women and new moms, regardless of ability to pay.



# Celebrating Dazzling, Healthy Smiles For 23 Years!

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Both are graduates of the University of Pittsburgh School of Dental Medicine and have completed continuing education courses at the world-renowned Las Vegas Institute for Advanced Dental Studies.

The staff of Carpenter Dental, including office manager Elaine Carpenter, understands how important it is to have a confident smile, not just for appearance's sake, but for overall health and proper nutrition.

## Forward Thinking

"I was a 'dental phobic' as a child," confides Dr. Carpenter. "Here, we want patients to feel comfortable, relaxed, and safe. Staying current with the newest technology and best practices help us do that."

Dentistry has made terrific strides, and the introduction of the dental laser is a good example.

"I call it my 'magic wand,'" laughs Dr. Carpenter, who has obtained



Dr. Chas Carpenter and Dr. Charles Carpenter

Mastership status in the World Clinical Laser Institute and is a member of the Board of Directors of the Academy of Laser Dentistry. "I can treat the hard tissue of teeth and bones, as well as the soft tissue of the mouth, including successfully treating periodontal disease and tongue-tied children. The laser can reduce discomfort, bleeding, and procedural time, making it especially useful for our youngest patients who need tooth decay removed prior to having a filling placed."

## Smile Makeovers

"It's important to first assure the health of your mouth before you invest in cosmetic work," advises Dr. Chas, a member of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry. "In our practice, we strive to have well-informed patients who make wise decisions and take good care of their teeth and gums so that restorations last."

Dr. Chas enjoys working with a patient who wants to "replace what's been lost during the aging process or has worn away." He considers facial contours and details such as how the lips frame the teeth before he designs a treatment plan.

"Well-modeled cosmetic restorations can act as a dental facelift for patients and give them a more youthful, attractive smile," he says.

## Welcome to the Family

"It all comes down to a commitment to what is best for each patient," emphasizes Dr. Carpenter. "We hope we've communicated to our patients over the years that their dental health and their satisfaction with the results of our work are of paramount importance."

"Our goals are healthy gums, well-aligned jaws and bites, and beautiful smiles," agrees Dr. Chas.

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# Better together

## YMCA merger allows organization to more effectively serve community

By Marcella Kester  
For Times Leader

In a year full of unforeseen challenges, an 18 month-long merger between the Wilkes-Barre Family and Greater Pittston YMCAs was finalized back in August to form the newly coined Greater Wyoming Valley Area YMCA.

The binding of two Ys can help strengthen the bond not only between locations, but between members, residents and communities over all through programs, events and more.

Both the Wilkes-Barre and Pittston Ys have been in operation for more than 100 years; however, they have operated as separate entities. Most YMCA's operate as small, independent non-profits that were originally founded by local community leaders.

"Every YMCA shares the same mission and purpose, but each is autonomous from a finance and operations standpoint," GWVA YMCA Financial Development Director Lindsay Landis explained. "Any funds raised and donated locally stay here to support local community programming."



Submitted photo

The merger of the Wilkes-Barre Family and Greater Pittston YMCAs allows the new organization to better serve the children of the Wyoming Valley.

During the pandemic organizations such as the YMCA served an important role in their communities, many of which were able to offer valuable programs such

as child care to front-line workers and first responders during the pandemic. Unfortunately, some – such as the Hazleton YMCA – were forced to close their

doors permanently.

By completing the merger, the Wilkes-Barre and Pittston YMCA's created a base of strength and sustainability that allows for critical servic-

es, such as child care, to continue. It also allowed other programs like Aquatics and Summer Camp to benefit overall.

"Without the YMCA and its supporters there

are children with working parents that would have nowhere to go, there are families who would struggle to stretch their grocery budget," Landis said. "Without the merger, the Y could not continue to support this community when it needs support the most."

Kevin O'Boyle, Board of Directors Vice President for the GWVA YMCA, said the merger also allows the locations to cross-market unique programs and services of each at a larger, regional level.

In fact, YMCAs across the country have been merging in order to collaborate and share resources. The merge of Wilkes-Barre and Pittston Ys was facilitated with the support of Y-USA personnel.

"Innovation and efficiency are critical for continuing to provide valued services to our communities," O'Boyle said. "The rationale for joining the organizations rests on pursuing new growth opportunities and on leveraging the talented staff and volunteers of each organization."

The Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA, Greater

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Pittston YMCA and Camp Kresge will maintain their local identities, acting as branches of the Greater Wyoming Valley Area YMCA.

In terms of staffing and administration, Wilkes-Barre Y Executive Director Jim Thomas has now become the CEO for the GWVA YMCA. Janelle Drach serves as executive director for Pittston, and Michael McElhinney will oversee Camp Kresge.

A full Board of Directors and Trustees was created by combining board members from both locations, and board sub-committees can advance specific programming and community needs. Volunteers are still welcome at both locations.

Another positive change that came along with the merger is the fact that members are now able to access both facilities for the price of one. As always, the Y accepts everyone regardless of an ability to pay through their Annual Support Campaign financial aid scholarships.

"A YMCA membership now offers more opportunities for classes and programs, and additional time slots and location options while continuing to serve all ages," Landis said.

The Greater Wyoming Valley Area YMCA is preparing for summer programming, including Camp Kresge, multiple summer learning programs and free food distributions that occur at the Wilkes-Barre YMCA twice a month.



Submitted photo

The merger of the Wilkes-Barre Family and Greater Pittston YMCAs allows the new organization to better serve the children of the Wyoming Valley.



Submitted photo

The Wilkes-Barre YMCA building on Northampton Street in Wilkes-Barre.

A new program is also now being offered to all families with autistic individuals called the A-Team, which will give families and caregivers an opportunity to socialize with one another and

share information.

Board President Lindsay Griffin said the merger came at a critical time, allowing for programs to be strengthened for the benefit of the greater Wyoming Valley com-

munity.

"This partnership allows for the enhancement of programs, innovation of memberships and strengthened programs and community offerings," Griffin



Submitted photo

The Greater Pittston YMCA building on Main Street in Pittston.

explained.

"These provide not only value to our members and residents of the Greater Wyoming Valley, but the vital resources

needed for our community as we move forward into the next phase of recovery and into a bright and sustainable future."



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# Great outdoors ... a great place to be

## Recreation opportunities abound in Northeastern Pennsylvania

By Kevin Carroll  
kcarroll@timesleader.com

What do you do when a pandemic forces limits on indoor gatherings and large groups of people?

You hit the great outdoors, of course.

There are an endless amount of ways to utilize Luzerne County's vast wealth of outdoor space, especially as the days grow longer and warmer

with each turn of the calendar.

Whether looking for a sport, for a learning experience, for exercise or just for fun — it's impossible to run out of things to do and places to see in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

### Hit the links

While there are plenty of golf courses in the area to check out if that's

your game, there's a different kind of "links" that has been growing rapidly in popularity over the last few years.

In Nesbitt Park on the Kingston side of the Susquehanna River, a nine-hole disc golf course was built in 2017. Since then, it's a sport that has brought hundreds to the river banks to try their hand at the sport, which involves throwing your

disc into a basket located some distance away.

Scoring is done much like regular golf — the object is to get the disc into the "hole" in as few strokes as possible.

It's a good way to get in some exercise (walking the course from first tee to last hole is more than enough to get a good workout in) while also having some competitive fun with a few friends, or even by yourself.

Much like going to a state park, the course is laid out with social distance built in: there's plenty of distance between tee boxes and the holes, and as any golfer could tell you, proper golf etiquette calls for giving other groups plenty of space to play their game at their pace.

"It's not that serious," said Joe Poplawski, the owner of Sword in the Stone Games in Wilkes-Barre and an avid disc

golfer. "But it's a lot of fun and decent exercise. ... You work muscles you wouldn't work just sitting on the couch."

The course is open to the public and free to play, all that's required are the discs, which you could purchase at most sporting goods stores (Sword in the Stone also has discs for sale).

And if you're looking to get involved in a more

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Billy Corcoran tees off during a round of disc golf at Nesbitt Park.

Kevin Carroll | Times Leader





Times Leader file photo

Frances Slocum State Park

## Outdoors

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competitive atmosphere, the course has its own Facebook page, Nesbitt Park Disc Golf, where updates are provided for tee times and tournaments.

### Get to steppin'

Sometimes, it pays to keep things simple.

Walking may not be the most glamorous form of exercise, but it could certainly work up a sweat and keep people healthy. It's definitely the simplest, easiest way to get the body moving: you don't need a gym

membership, or expensive equipment. A pair of trusty running shoes, reasonably nice weather and time are all you need to get the legs moving.

It's not only a big help physically, either; walking could also do wonders for mental health, as well. Pop in the headphones, get some air and you'll be feeling great, if maybe a little exhausted.

Luzerne County has no shortage of outdoor places with walking trails for the public. The county is home to a number of state parks, including Frances Slocum State Park in Kingston Township and Ricketts Glen State Park in the area of Fairmount and Ross

Townships.

These parks have plenty to offer in the way of recreation: walking trails (or running trails if you're so inclined), swimming and fishing areas, tables for picnics and plenty of nature to behold.

What makes these huge parks so tailor-made for COVID-era exercise is the sheer amount of space afforded to hikers and other visitors: it's possible to walk a couple miles without seeing a single other person. So, in groups of two or three or even by yourself, walking might be a good option for those looking to get in some exercise this spring.

Outdoor recreation areas like the Francis E. Walter Dam or the Seven Tubs Recreation Area, both located near Bear Creek Township, are also places with plenty of trails and room to walk or hike.

And on an even smaller scale, walking doesn't require a huge state park to do. As long as the sidewalks thaw out sometime soon, it's just as easy to take a trip around the neighborhood.

### Other outdoor activities

The beauty of the outdoors is that, to an extent, there's a limitless amount of possibilities.

Even in the midst of a pandemic, there's plenty

of ways to keep yourself entertained if you really set your mind to it. And in this area, there are an incredible amount of places to spend an afternoon, and see some really cool stuff.

For example, a trip up to the Lands at Hillside Farms, located in Shavertown, could pay off in a few different ways.

The Farms provide a picturesque backdrop at just about every turn, with wonderful views of the Back Mountain. Students could learn more about how the farm is run, and brush up on a number of different subjects, including science, agriculture, ecology, land conservation and more.

The Farms also includes a greenhouse and a dairy store where visitors could stock up on all sort of food and snacks, including some of the best ice cream available anywhere in the area.

Some other fun spots around the region include Lahey Family Fun Park in Clarks Summit (home to batting cages and two miniature golf courses), Nay Aug Park in Scranton and the Forty Fort Borough Sports Complex, which contains a multitude of soccer and softball fields in addition to a walking path along the levee on the banks of the Susquehanna River.



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# Don't expect a return to old ways

WILKES-BARRE — So what's next?

I'm often asked what our world will look like when the pandemic is over. People refer to this as the "new normal."

I can tell you that nothing will ever be normal again.

COVID has changed so many things in our daily lives and will continue to do so for generations to come. The way we shop, live, work and play will never be the same. Technological advances have been accelerated by the virus and will begin to shape how we go about our daily lives.

We are now living in a world of acronyms. While I won't explain each one in this article, I recommend you look to "The Google" for definitions of: CRISPR, MRNA, 6G, DTC, NFT, AR, OPS, VR, AI, QSR, Crypto's, SPACs and on and on.

Currently we are experiencing a global shortage of crucial components. Lumber prices are more than double what they previous were — substantially raising construction costs on new buildings and homes. There are shortages with steel and plastics. Compa-



**John Augustine**  
Guest columnist

nies that use computer chips in everything from automobiles to electronic gadgets made the wrong bet with the virus, assuming that consumers would spend less. When in fact, because of the quarantine

people ended up buying more computers, phones, cars, etc. Not helping the matter was the continued reliance on China for so many of the products that we need.

So what's next?

The answer is "hybrid." Extremism in any form is bad. Whether that be religion, politics, etc. We went from shopping and dining in public and being in school or at work everyday to the exact opposite. Going forward all of these activities will be done in a hybrid mode. Some students will be in school a few days a week. Remote working in conjunction with physical trips to the office will be reality. Movie theaters, sports events and large gatherings will be forever changed.

Here are a few other changes that we will see locally.

**Retail:** The virus created more consumers

and new generations of people shopping online for products that they need and want. Companies that will be successful will need to rely heavily on Ecommerce. Niche products will also have brick and mortar options. Robots will begin to replace fast food workers. Ghost kitchens will be a term that everyone will soon be familiar with. New food delivery options are already in place in large cities and airports around the country. Artificial intelligence will shape how brands are introduced, marketed and sold to consumers.

**Office:** Remote working has changed the way we do business. Cities like New York, Los Angeles and others will see less people in the office on a daily basis. In NYC for example, it costs more than \$15,000 (rent/taxes) a year for a person to sit in an office. Companies that occupied large amounts of square footage will be cutting back. There will be growth in specialty offices and healthcare will lead this trend.

**Ecommerce/Distribution Centers:** In the 4th quarter of 2020, the I-78 and I-81 corridor led the country in

market absorption — a record that was previously unheard of. Currently, from Schuylkill County to Lackawanna County, there are more than 15 million square feet of new industrial space planned. Most of these buildings will be taken off the market with tenants before it is even completed. Companies are looking for options that are move in ready.

Recently the trend has been to build 1 million square foot large boxes. While that will continue, we are starting to see smaller boxes in more locations. Buildings the size of 400–500k sf will be more commonplace as companies look to solve the "last mile" issue. This is where consumers want a product that they ordered online the next or even same day.

Due to the increase in ground shipping, autonomous tractor trailers are right around the corner. Plan to begin seeing a truck with no driver on I-81 as soon as next year.

**Manufacturing:** We are finally starting to see manufacturing as a whole make a comeback locally. Recently great projects like Ball Corporation, Canpack and Wren Kitchens have been announced and

more are on their way. Our low cost and reliable utilities, as well as on-shoring are driving this trend.

**Summary:** Location used to be the number one factor in driving a company's location decision. Now the labor force is the key reason. As automation and robotics begin to replace many jobs, it is important that we look to retrain and teach new skills to potential employees. Trades and jobs that cannot be outsourced will lead future growth opportunities — as will careers in the medical and technology industries.

Because of the boom in Ecommerce and distribution, we have more than doubled our minimum wage locally all without government intervention.

Just 2 or 3 years ago, the average starting salary in this industry was around \$9.25/hr. We have now doubled minimum wage to an average starting salary of \$15.75 — through competition and growth. And in many cases, these positions come with sign on bonuses, incentives and health care.

I know of no job locally that pays minimum wage for a full-time position. Through

competition these wages will continue to increase. Some manufacturers recently have announced more than \$25/hour for starting positions. Higher skilled jobs pay even more.

Our economic development agencies and private industry partners have worked together to bring more than 5,000 new jobs to NEPA in just a few years.

We went from some of the lowest historical unemployment rates to some of the highest. As of January 2021, PA's unemployment rate was 7.3% and NEPA was 9.3%. However, there are hundreds of job openings available. There is a job for anyone who wants one and there are many more on the way.

Job seekers should look toward the jobs of the future so they can position themselves well in an ever-changing global market. Remember, robots don't get COVID and they don't call in sick. You also can't outsource a skilled tradesman's talents and these types of jobs will be in demand forever.

After all, someone has to fix the robots when they break.

John Augustine is the president/CEO Penn's Northeast.



# The show will go on once again

Here at Mohegan Sun Arena, the first two months of 2020 were everything we had hoped for.

Disney On Ice and Monster Jam — two perennial favorites on our annual show schedule — had just set venue attendance records. Tool was sold out. Country superstar Tim McGraw was on pace to do the same.

We were off and running.

The legendary Bob Dylan had just been announced. WWE had just gone on sale with a nationally-televised Monday Night Raw event. And the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins were making a push for the playoffs with only seven home games left on their 2019-2020 schedule.

All was well. Life was good. Then, in what seemed like a blink of the eye, the curtains closed, the lights went out, and the doors slammed shut.

It was March 12, the eve of a concert in our building featuring Aaron Lewis. News of the Coronavirus had already been dominating the airwaves, but now the numbers were growing, and major events were suddenly postponing, canceling.

On a national level, rumors started swirling about the NHL and



**Will Beekman**  
Guest Columnist

NBA postponing the remainder of their respective schedules, and worldwide concert promoter, Live Nation, was doing the same with all of its concerts. Locally, the city of Scranton had just announced that it was putting the brakes on its nationally recognized St. Patrick's Day Parade.

Inside Mohegan Sun Arena, the phones started ringing. Questions were being asked. Were we postponing the Aaron Lewis concert? Were we following through? What in the world was going on?

We honestly had little clue as to what was happening, but when the promoter for the Aaron Lewis concert decided to postpone, a developing, national crisis had officially hit home. That Aaron Lewis concert was quickly rescheduled for a new date in May, and I drove home that night realizing that the next few weeks were going to be weird, challenging and a little bit scary.

What I did not realize was that the Aaron Lewis concert was never going to happen. I did not realize that the Tool, Tim McGraw and Bob Dylan concerts would not happen either, or that the Penguins would never

play those final seven home games. I also failed to realize that we would soon be refunding more than \$3 million worth of tickets, and that our doors would remain shut for more than a year.

And let's be honest, they are not yet fully open. Yes, we have managed to crack them open, just enough to breathe, but we are still very much a shuttered venue.

To put it lightly, the past 13 months have been challenging. The live event industry was the first to shut down, and it will be the last to fully reopen. Here at the arena, we have witnessed a drastic reduction in workforce that has affected real people, real lives. And we are facing financial challenges that this facility has not seen in its 21 years of existence.

Yet, we have somehow remained positive. Over the past year, we have done our best to use this downtime wisely. We identified and completed upgrades inside of the venue that will make us better, safer going forward. We came up with unique ways to remain active and helpful in our community by hosting online concerts, a drive-through COVID-19 testing site and high-profile court trials. And we even found a way to do what we do best: host live



Fred Adams | Times Leader

Fans sit in the stands as the Zamboni cleans the ice before the start of the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins game with the Syracuse Crunch last month. Fans have returned to Mohegan Sun Arena with up to 1,500 spectators being allowed in to Penguin games.

events.

Over the summer of 2020, we became the first venue in our area — and one of the first in the country — to host drive-in style concerts in our parking lot. They were hugely successful thanks to artists like Jim Gaffigan and Billy Strings, and while they offered little assistance to our bottom line, they did offer a much-needed boost to staff and venue morale.

Most importantly, these events assisted us in maintaining our relevance and our sanity.

More than a year since our first postponement, we find ourselves battered and bruised, but stronger and hungrier than ever. As restrictions

loosen and vaccines are administered, we see a much-deserved light at the end of the tunnel.

Hockey is back. Sort of. The Penguins have been playing to "capacity" crowds of 1,500 fans. Events are returning. Sort of. This May and June we will host more high school and college commencements than any other year in our history. Sure, they will look different, and feel different, but they will happen. And they will happen indoors at Mohegan Sun Arena.

What about concerts, you ask? Those are coming too. I promise. Right now, our fall and winter calendars are packed with so many events that I want so badly to tell

you about, and I pray they come to fruition.

We deserve it. You deserve it.

Personally, I've learned over the past year that life is all about finding the silver lining. And the silver lining here is that we are getting through this, and we will emerge on the other side of this pandemic a better organization for having gone through it.

So, get ready, because the curtains will soon rise. The lights will soon shine. The doors will fully reopen. The show must go on.

And it will.

Will Beekman is the General Manager for ASM Global at the Mohegan Sun Arena at Casey Plaza.



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# County government keeping some changes made during coronavirus pandemic

By Jennifer Learn-Andes  
jandes@timesleader.com

While it's not an ordeal anyone wants to repeat, Luzerne County government is emerging from the coronavirus pandemic with some discoveries that will result in lasting, positive changes.

More information and services are now accessible online without the need to visit county buildings, and county Manager C. David Pedri said that menu will continue to expand as one of his main 2021 goals.

The output of some employees also increased with remote working, prompting him to support more hybrid scheduling involving a mix of at work at home and in the office in situations that make sense. For example, he found caseworkers were able to complete more reports on client visits throughout the county when they did not have to invest additional time on the road returning to the office.

Pedri does not want to revert back to long lines of residents forced to wait hours for gun permits, saying the advance submittal of information and scheduling of appointments instituted during the pandemic is



Vallet

more efficient.

He also expects more county business to be conducted virtually for the convenience of the public, attorneys and other professionals involved, such as sessions related to wills and estates.

"We were forced into these changes, but it's been pretty impressive to see basically the next generation of what county services could be," Pedri said.

## Client connection

Desperate to keep seniors engaged when active adult centers shut down, the county's Area Agency on Aging started offering a range of exercise classes through the free online Zoom platform.

Many past participants of the in-person classes switched to the new option.

An unexpected find: the classes attracted



Pedri

new seniors unwilling or unable to leave their homes for an exercise class, regardless of the state of the pandemic, said Mary Roselle, the agency's executive director.

"We reached a different group of individuals," Roselle said.

She does not want to lose that newfound link to more seniors and said some online classes will continue after the pandemic.

Class information is available under the health and wellness news section of the aging department page at [luzernecounty.org](http://luzernecounty.org) or by calling 570-822-1158.

In the county Mental Health and Developmental Services department, the switch from in-person sessions to more telehealth ones also yielded surprising positive reception, said agency Administrator



DiMauro

Tara Vallet.

Telehealth sessions and consultations conducted by phone or through other technology were possible because its many restrictions and guidelines were loosened due to COVID-19, she said.

"It's something we were somewhat resistant to in the past," Vallet said. "Telehealth has become quite a positive in mental health services in general, and having the capacity to provide mental health services has been an enormous benefit during this pandemic."

As with the aging agency's exercise classes, Vallet and her staff and providers found they were able to reach more people through telehealth.

"People who were reluctant to access services in the past were much more receptive to telehealth services than they were to face-to-face,



Roselle

in-center programs," she said.

Vallet's agency is working with providers and the state to maintain some level of post-pandemic accessibility to telehealth services for clients "more comfortable with that type of service."

County Drug and Alcohol Administrator Ryan Hogan said his agency observed a similar embracing of telehealth services for those with substance use disorder.

Childcare and transportation often have been identified as significant barriers to accessing drug and alcohol treatment services, Hogan said. Work schedules also can be an issue.

"Telehealth allowed both access to service and frequency of service to be more available," Hogan said.

That included virtual sessions with certified

recovery specialists (CRS), he said.

"It meant people ambivalent or less likely to seek treatment services were able to access CRS services and interact, and maybe that motivated people to enter into drug and alcohol treatment," Hogan said.

Even many Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings shifted to virtual platforms, which also alleviated the transportation/childcare/work obstacles that existed for many before the pandemic, Hogan said.

"This helped people who were not able to attend meetings as regularly or as often as they'd like to," he said.

Links to the meeting schedules are posted under the drug and alcohol section at [luzerne-county.org](http://luzerne-county.org).

The county's network of providers also had more training opportunities available because they were offered online, removing the time and expense of travel and lodging, Hogan said.

"It really increased professional development during this pandemic," he said.

Children and Youth caseworkers still had to



## County

From page 58

physically visit families throughout the pandemic, but virtual court proceedings are being held for dependencies, shelter care and status checks, said agency Deputy Director Deanna German.

The virtual sessions have been positive for many families who have the same barriers with transportation encountered in the other human service branches, German said. These sessions also were more efficient because they stuck to a schedule and had specific start times, she said.

"There has been talk at the judge's roundtable about the possibility of continuing to hold these types of hearings remotely," German said.

Some service providers also reported better participation among families through telehealth referrals, she said.

Overall, the pandemic forced the agencies to "become more creative," said county Human Services Division Head Lynn Hill.

"We've had access to technology we did not have before. It's been a huge benefit," Hill said.

### Court alterations

Before the pandemic, attorneys filing motions

had to personally meet with a judge to get a hearing scheduled for criminal court. Now they email the paperwork for the judge to review and process.

The time-saving change is now being implemented in civil court, said county Court of Common Pleas President Judge Michael T. Vough.

"That worked so well, we will continue it after the pandemic," Vough said.

He also expects various types of proceedings to continue virtually in the future, although he stressed jury selection, trials and some other matters must be held in-

person.

"There are some practices that we've implemented that will be part of our model going forward," Vough said.

### Maximizing time

With more than 30 county departments scattered in multiple locations, Pedri said he has been able to squeeze in more meetings through online technology.

He looks forward to more one-on-one interaction but plans to continue making use of virtual platforms as a time-saver for all attendees.

"Now everyone is adept at virtual meetings. Having this as an option has opened my eyes, and

I think most people are trying to get things done as efficiently as possible," Pedri said.

County officials also may opt to continue offering virtual public meetings after in-person ones resume. One citizen had urged the county Election Board to keep providing the virtual option, saying she appreciated the access during the pandemic and would be unable to travel to Wilkes-Barre from her residence in the Salem Township area.

County Information Technology Director Mauro DiMauro said he and his staff had to work double time in the pandemic to make

remote work and virtual meetings possible, but it forced everyone to learn a new way to perform functions.

"Coming out of the pandemic, we will be able to leverage that for more collaboration," he said.

DiMauro and his workers are now accustomed to using a chat feature on Microsoft Teams in which messages pop up when those in the group want to ask questions or provide updates or alerts that are of interest to all.

"We had the ability before the pandemic but never really used it, but we used that all day long throughout the pandemic," DiMauro said.

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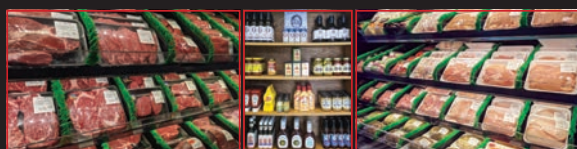


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# Fundraising gone virtual

## Candy's Place takes annual walk – and more – online

**By Geri Gibbons**  
For Times Leader

FORTY-FORT – For a second year in a row, Candy's Place is taking their annual walk virtual.

This year, however, the fundraiser has a new twist, with participants welcome to grab not only their sneakers, but their jump ropes, kayaks, gym pass or dancing shoes to get the job done.

The organization's director Lisa Orlandini, in an announcement posted to Facebook from her treadmill, said participants are able to do any activity roughly equivalent to a two-mile walk at any time during the entire month of May.

"Any activity is valid as long as there is movement," she said.

Although the coronavirus pandemic has been especially challenging to the center that serves cancer clients and their loved ones, the organization utilized a creative approach to remain a strong resource for those going through cancer, their families and the entire community.

Participants are encouraged to grab a selfie or video of their activity, and share online

– on either Facebook or Instagram – tagging it #CandysVirtuALL.

### Local, national, global

The cool thing about the virtual walk, Orlandini said, is that participants can do it from all over the area, country and even the globe, simply hashtagging it to bring it to the center's Facebook and Instagram feed.

Two of Orlandini's children are from out of the area and will be participating and posting to the organization's social media.

People and families can also choose to walk in groups, perhaps turning the event into an opportunity for an afternoon hike for a good cause.

Included in a \$25 registration fee will be a Candy's Place face mask and the opportunity to print out a race number to be worn during the activity chosen.

This is not Candy's Place first virtual walk, last October was there first with about 150 supporters participating, nearly half as many as had participated in 2019's in person walk.

The Center is now open on a limited basis, but dur-



Submitted photo

**Candy's Place director Lisa Orlandini announced the organization's virtual run from her treadmill.**

ing the period when it was closed according to the governor's order and out of concern for clients, it took to the internet, providing support groups and activities online.

Orlandini said cancer patients are very much aware of good safety prac-

tices and keeping their immune systems healthy, so for many the restrictions of the pandemic were second nature.

As part of that the organization's online support system, Dr. Peter Amato will take to Facebook on May 8 as a special addi-

tion to the VirtuALL event.

Amato will be speaking about creating a holistic view of well-being and the virtual event is open to everyone. Participants can register online with a \$15 registration fee.

Orlandini stressed that

the Center is not only a resource for cancer patients and their loved ones, but is also often a wellness resource for the entire community.

Those wanting to participate can register online at <https://tinyurl.com/j5kbxerk>



# New artist-in-residence to take over 900 Rutter space

By Samya Kullab  
The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The death toll from a massive fire at a Baghdad hospital for coronavirus patients rose to at least 82 Sunday as anxious families searched for missing relatives and the government suspended key health officials for alleged negligence.

The flames, described by one witness as “volcanoes of fire,” swept through the intensive care unit of the Ibn al-Khatib Hospital, which tends exclusively to COVID-19 patients with severe symptoms. Officials said the blaze, which also injured 110 people, was set off by an exploding oxygen cylinder.

Nurse Maher Ahmed was called to the scene late Saturday to help evacuate patients.

“I could not have imagined it would be a massive blaze like that,” he said. The flames overwhelmed the hospital’s second floor isolation hall within three to four minutes of the oxygen cylinder exploding, he said. “Volcanoes of fire.”

Most of those killed suffered severe burns, he said. Others were overcome by smoke, unwilling to leave behind relatives hooked up to ventilators. Ahmed said the patients could not be



Submitted photo

Anna Malsky, artist-in-residence at 900 Rutter Ave., poses with some pieces that will be displayed at her new gallery there, ANNAMALY. According to her, these pieces were created during her time in college, and acted as a way for her to explore a sense of dread that she associates with certain physical textures.

moved. “They would have minutes to live without oxygen.”

He said he and others watched helplessly as one patient struggled to breathe amid the smoke.

Widespread negligence on the part of health officials is to blame for the fire, Iraq’s prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, said Sunday. Following a special cabinet meeting to discuss the blaze, the government suspended key officials, including the health minister and the governor of Baghdad province. Other officials, including the hospital director, were dismissed from their posts.

It took firefighters and civil defense teams until early Sunday to put out the flames.

Among the dead were at least 28 patients on

ventilators, tweeted Ali al-Bayati, a spokesman of the country’s independent Human Rights Commission, a semi-official body.

Paramedics carried the bodies, many burned beyond recognition, to al-Zafaraniya Hospital, where Ahmed said forensics teams will attempt to identify them by matching DNA samples to relatives.

By midday Sunday, relatives were still searching anxiously for loved ones.

“Please, two of my relatives are missing. ... I am going to die (without news about them),” posted a young woman on social media after a fruitless search for her family members. “I hope someone can help us find Sadi Abdul Kareem and

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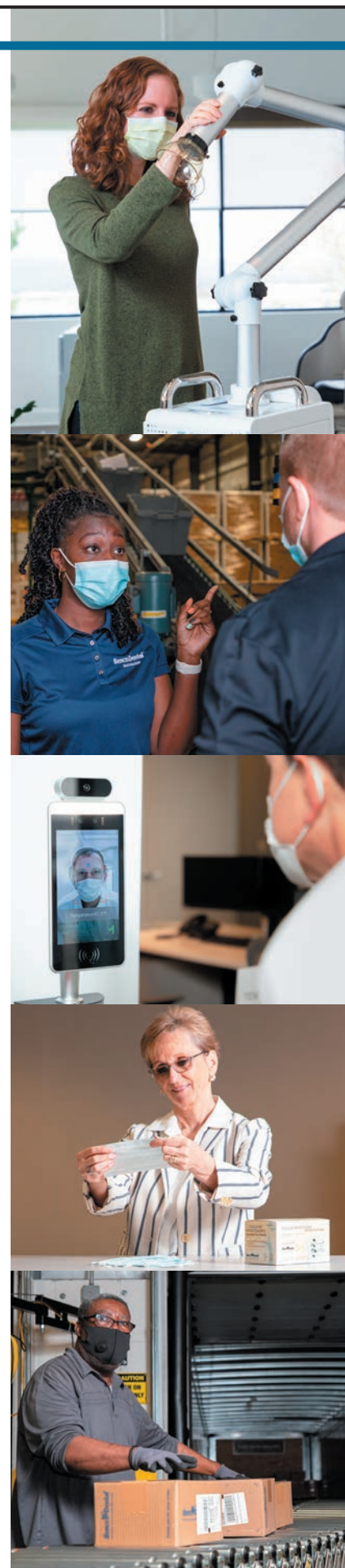
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## Space

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Samir Abdul Kareem, they were in the ICU.”

Rokya Kareem, 30, was looking frantically for her friend Riyam Rahman, a pharmacist, who was visiting her mother at the hospital. Rahman's mother, Basima, was admitted to the hospital 45 days ago with complications from COVID-19.

“All we know is they were in the room next to where the fire started,” she said. “Her phone is switched off, and her family has gone to every hospital trying to find them.”

The fire happened

as Iraq grapples with a severe second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. Daily virus cases now average around 8,000, the highest level since Iraq began recording infection rates early last year. At least 15,200 people have died of coronavirus in Iraq among at least 100,000 confirmed cases.

Years of sanctions and war have crippled the country's health sector, and the latest infection wave has tested the limits of health facilities. Security concerns also plague the country as frequent rocket attacks continue to target army bases hosting foreign troops and the seat of Iraq's government.

The deadly fire was only the latest chapter in Iraq's poor record for public safety.

In March 2019, over 100 people died when a ferry capsized on the Tigris River near the northern city of Mosul. The boat overturned due to overcrowding and high water. A few months later, in September 2019, a fire ripped through Baghdad's Shorja market, a major commercial area in the city, burning many shops to the ground.

Part of the problem is that laws and regulations governing public safety and health are old, said Yesar al-Maliki, an adviser to the Iraq Energy Institute.

“It has to do with the overall system. There are no detailed regulations and (standard operating procedures) on how to do basic things step by step, especially when handling risky equipment,” said Al-Maliki, who also worked in Iraq's oil and gas industry.

“There needs to be specialists handling policy, regulation and implementation,” he said. “If there was a standard operating procedure on how to handle oxygen bottles, especially noticing wear and tear ... This wouldn't have happened.”

The prime minister convened the special cabinet session hours after the flames broke out.

In addition to suspending the health minister, Hasan al-Tamimi, and Baghdad's governor, the cabinet ordered an investigation of the health minister and key hospital officials responsible for overseeing safety measures.

The cabinet also fired the director-general of the Baghdad health department in the al-Rusafa area, where the hospital is located, and the hospital's director of engineering and maintenance, according to a statement from the Health Ministry and the prime minister's office.

“Negligence in such matters is not a mistake, but a crime for which all negligent parties must

bear responsibility,” al-Kadhimi said Sunday after a meeting.

The United Nations envoy to Iraq, Jeannine Hennis-Plasschaert, expressed “shock and pain” over the fire in a statement and called for stronger protection measures in hospitals.

At the Vatican, Pope Francis, who concluded a historic trip to Iraq last month, remembered those who perished in the blaze. Addressing people gathered in St. Peter's Square for his customary Sunday appearance, Francis mentioned the news of the dead. “Let's pray for them,” he said.



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# Broncos Vault finds success amid difficult times

By Kevin Carroll

kcarroll@timesleader.com

**WILKES-BARRE —** Opening a restaurant is tough.

Opening a restaurant right as a pandemic breaks out and shuts everything down? Even tougher.

But while COVID-19 may have provided Broncos Vault Brazilian Steakhouse with a pretty hefty obstacle right out of the gate, owner Edilene Falcon and her team have weathered the storm and are poised to come out clean on the other side (whenever we get there).

"I think it speaks to how strong our business is as a whole," Falcon said in an interview conducted inside Broncos Vault, located on the corner of Market Street and Franklin Street in Wilkes-Barre.

"How many other businesses could say they opened during a pandemic and survived?"

Even with the restrictions put in place to mitigate COVID-19, Broncos Vault has established itself as one of Wilkes-Barre's preeminent fine dining experiences in just under a year.

Falcon, who also owns the original Broncos Brazilian Steakhouse in Philadelphia, credits the community for her restaurant's success.



Several of the tables inside Broncos Vault, such as the one seen here, are in their own little corners of the restaurant to provide privacy and safety amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The citizens of Wilkes-Barre have helped us out tremendously," Falcon said. "Spreading the word, writing kind reviews. ... Everybody is very supportive and helpful to one another here."

That sort of small-city hospitality was part of the reason why Falcon wanted to come to the area.

Born in Brazil and a longtime resident of Philadelphia, Falcon said she got into the restaurant business about seven years ago

while looking for a change in direction.

"My restaurant in Philadelphia has done quite well, and I had a friend who told me about this area," Falcon said. "I love it here, it's so beautiful with the mountains and the parks, all the scenery."

Broncos Vault officially opened on June 25, 2020. According to Falcon, the restaurant was supposed to open a few months prior, but of course, COVID-19 changed things.

"We had done some

remodeling, we didn't have to do much because this space was already so gorgeous, but we got some carpeting and did a few other things," Falcon said.

"Then, right as we were getting ready to open, everything started shutting down."

Thus launched a period of time where, like countless other business owners and especially with a new business preparing to debut, Falcon and her staff were unsure of what would happen

next.

"There was such confusion about what we could do and couldn't do," Falcon said. "So we started doing things little-by-little until we could open in June."

While signs of the times are still evident throughout Broncos Vault's space (masks on servers and employees, tables set far apart from one another), Falcon knows that the unique experience provided by her restaurant remains unimpeded.

"At first, customers

were a little nervous about coming back," Falcon said. "But we're still able to provide everyone with a fun dining experience."

What makes Broncos Vault stand out? It's a number of things, according to Falcon.

For one, the restaurant features a buffet staffed by servers and stocked with gloves so customers could, if they choose, serve themselves.

If that's not your style, Broncos Vault's chefs are also on hand to prepare dinner right at the table, cutting and dicing up the delicious meats and entrees served by the restaurant.

Though a steakhouse by name, Broncos Vault features up to 10 different kinds of meat, all available for customer to try.

"At other places, you get chicken or you get steak," Falcon said. "Here, you could get pork, you could get a number of different things."

As Broncos Vault's birthday draws closer, Falcon is encouraged by the restaurant's growth and progress, and mindful that the next year could be even better.

"Next year will be a lot different, for sure," she said. "But we are strong, and we are excited and ready to keep growing."

Kevin Carroll | Times Leader



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