EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S REPORT FOR MARCH 2021
Innovation Entente Lab opens new digs, expands support to region’s entrepreneurs

Friday, March 05, 2021

Expand is the operative word given the March 1 opening of Mercyhurst University’s new Innovation Entente Lab (IEL) as well as the launch of its mobile unit, the hiring of new staff, and increased geographical coverage.

The IEL, part of the NWPA Innovation Beehive Network (https://www.nwpabeehive.com/) formed in 2014 to enhance business expansion and development in the region, combines the university’s strong expertise in applied sciences with its rich tradition of liberal arts education to help promote community entrepreneurship and innovation.
IEL team members help clients identify key marketing strategies, potential funding pipelines, and the necessary strategic media options to help place entrepreneurs and small business owners on the path to success.

Thanks to the combined effect of recent grants, what was once a makeshift research lab has morphed into an uber-modern facility with 15 work stations, robust technological capabilities, two large wall monitors for projecting data, two MacBook Pros for graphic design, and a conference and presentation area.

Although the IEL staff, headed by Brian Fuller, and comprised of Mercyhurst undergraduate and graduate students, has been producing products for some time from various venues on campus, this marks the first time they have had a dedicated space, the result of an $89,000 grant from the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority.

The new space, which is situated on the ground floor of the library, just south of the Cyber Education Center, was designed in part with input from Mercyhurst's interior design and graphic design students; there's even an alumni connection. The lab's conference table was handmade of repurposed barn wood at Willow Creek Barn Wood Furniture in Edinboro, which 2015 Mercyhurst alumnus Casey Brown co-founded with his father, Chris. Casey's sister, Kennedy, is also a Mercyhurst graduate, Class of 2020.

A more recent three-year grant of $376,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission allows the IEL to provide more direct, on-site support by taking teams of students on the road to serve clients in their own environs. Until recently, the IEL had served a five-county area, but has since expanded its regional coverage to include 17 counties, including parts of New York and Ohio. The funding has also prompted the expansion of the IEL workforce, from two to three student teams and the hire of a new assistant director, Abbey Lesniewski, who oversees the lab's day-to-day operations and coordinates its mobile capabilities.

Fuller said the IEL averages 40 clients a year. "With the latest grant," he said, "we have gone from 12 to 15 student analysts and are looking to increase production by 25 percent this year and another 40 percent in years two and three."

While the program's expansion bodes well for the university, it's students, local entrepreneurs and small business owners, Mercyhurst University Provost Dr. Leanne Roberts recognizes the collaboration among area universities and Blasco
Library as being the key to continued success.

"The Innovation Entente Lab is the direct result of Mercyhurst's participation in the Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Beehive Network," Roberts said. "Since its inception in 2014 from an Ignite Erie Grant, the Network, comprised of the four local universities – Mercyhurst, Edinboro, Gannon, and Penn State Behrend – and the recent addition of Blasco Library – has worked to enhance business expansion and development in the Erie area. The Innovation Entente Lab is now one of five grant-funded centers that collaborate to encourage business growth with each location offering its own specialized area of expertise."

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Resources

Apply (https://www.mercyhurst.edu/apply/landing)
Visit Campus (/admissions-aid/undergraduate-admissions/visit-our-campus)
Confirm Enrollment (https://www.mercyhurst.edu/confirm-today)
Request Info (/request-info)
Contact Us (/about/contact-us)
Employment Opportunities (/human-resources)
Campus Map (/map)
Directions to Campus (/about/directions)

Quick Links

The Hub (https://hub.mercyhurst.edu)
Self-Service (https://selfservice.mercyhurst.edu/Student)

Economic Impact &
COVID Revitalization
Committee Meeting

Wednesday, February 24, 2021
11:00 a.m.

ZOOM Information
Link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84509360856?pwd=RjBRVnpNcUZla09rMVhGNVlhVDY2UT09
Meeting ID: 845 0936 0856
Passcode: 128266

AGENDA

1. The Nonprofit Partnership – Adam Bratton
2. Erie Sports Park – Bob Catalde
3. Good of the Order
Economic Impact &
COVID Revitalization
Committee Meeting

Wednesday, March 3, 2021
11:00 a.m.

ZOOM Information
Link:  https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84509360856?pwd=RiBRVnpNcUZIa09rMVhGNNhVDY2UT09
Meeting ID: 845 0936 0856
Passcode: 128266

AGENDA

1. Erie County Convention Center Authority – John “Casey” Wells

2. Good of the Order
Economic Impact & COVID Revitalization Committee Meeting

Wednesday, March 10, 2021
11:30 a.m.

ZOOM Information
Link:  https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84509360856?pwd=RjBRVnpNcUZIa09rMVhGNVlhVDY2UT09
Meeting ID: 845 0936 0856
Passcode: 128266

AGENDA

1. Dr. Parris Baker
2. Urban Erie Community Development Center – Gary Horton
3. Good of the Order
Economic Impact &
COVID Revitalization
Committee Meeting

Wednesday, March 17, 2021
11:00 a.m.

ZOOM Information
Link:  https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84509360856?pwd=RjBRVnpNcUZIa09rMVhGNVlhVDY2UT09
Meeting ID: 845 0936 0856
Passcode: 128266

AGENDA

1. Martin Luther King Center – James Sherrod
2. Stimulus Disbursement Observations – Autumn Anderson
3. Good of the Order
February 2021

Meeting with Executive Director
Ongoing Social Media Management
Ongoing Consulting
February Comms

IMPLEMENTED | Social
13 February posts

IMPLEMENTED | Anchor Building Grants
10 Graphics
Release

IN PROGRESS
COVID-19 Report
2021 Grant social graphics
County awards GECAC with Summer JAM contract

We are proud to continue this partnership with them.

From Staff Reports, Erie Times-News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Erie County government has awarded a 2021 contract for the Summer Jobs and More program to the Greater Erie Community Action Committee.

This will be the seventh year that GECAC has operated the program.

In 2020, the Summer JAM program provided opportunities for more than 30 employers to offer positions to approximately 89 Erie County youth.

More than 60% of participating youth were under 18 years old, and 65% were new to the program. Because of the pandemic, last summer’s participation was lower than in the previous years, but GECAC implemented an appropriate strategy to work through it, and the Erie County Department of Health provided COVID-19 safety training to these youth.

“GECAC’s consistent, creative and concentrated efforts of the Summer JAM program have demonstrated their commitment to the growth and development of Erie County,” said Gary N. Lee, the county’s director of administration. “We are proud to continue this partnership with them and appreciate their solid investment in, and impact on, our youth.”

GECAC offers recruitment and informational sessions for employers and participants through virtual meetings, outreach at local schools and community centers, social media blasts, and outdoor pop-up events. Youth are matched with employers based on the employer specifications, geographic proximity and availability of reliable transportation for youth. Then, GECAC provides orientation and training sessions.

The Summer JAM program is a collaborative effort of Erie County, GECAC, the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority and the Erie Community Foundation.

The program is open to Erie County residents ages 16 to 21 who meet the program’s household income guidelines.

The collaboration has invested approximately $2.3 million while developing more than 1,000 youth leaders since the program’s inception in 2014.

More information about the program can be found at https://bit.ly/2Bf729x. To apply for the program, contact GECAC at summerjam@gecac.org or 867-6571.

Summer JAM (Jobs and More) participant Johnathan Byers Hopkins, 17, works in a mail room at Erie Insurance in Erie in this June 28, 2018 file photo. GREG WOHLFORD/FILE PHOTO/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

Summer JAM program to return with GECAC again in charge

BY KATHLEEN SPINAZZOLLA
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SARA JUKER
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Summer Jobs and More, an Erie County program that gives job opportunities to youth, is slated to return this year with a contract to operate the program being awarded to Greater Erie Community Action Committee.

GECAC has operated the program for seven years, since Summer JAM’s inception.

In 2020, the Summer JAM program provided opportunities for more than 30 employers to offer positions to about 89 youth across Erie County with GECAC at the helm.

Corn youth and businesses have participated in the program since 2015.

City Manager Jason Biondi said he is not sure if the city of Corry will be participating in the Summer JAM program this upcoming summer because of COVID-19.

“We have participated for several years now but it will be dependent on what things look like when the time comes,” Biondi said. “We would like to but we have to evaluate.”

He went on to say the city has not been contacted yet about how the program will look like this year.

Corry Area High School 2018 graduate Dylan Vanderhook worked for the city as part of the Summer JAM program and came to love the job as a mechanic in the city garage. His part-time job became a career in 2020 when the city hired him full-time as an inspection mechanic.

The Summer Jobs and More program brought the city of Corry Dylan Vanderhook, who now works as a full-time inspection mechanic at the city garage.

See JAM, P3
Girard looks back to spur its future

Plans to seek Downtown Historic District designation

A little history can help shape the future. **Girard Borough is joining a growing list of Erie County municipalities that are building on their past to attract visitors and grow business.** Girard is developing a master plan on ways to use its history to revitalize its downtown.

"We want to create a look and feel for downtown that people want so that they're willing to visit, eat, do some shopping and see what we have to offer," Girard Borough Manager Rob Stabenbort said.

"A good-looking downtown area in a small town is the face of the town. We want to be sure we're seen at our best," Stabenbort said.

Girard Borough also plans to seek Downtown Historic District designation from the National Register of Historic Places to help draw new business and visitors.

See GIRARD, Page 4A

"Waterford has done a really nice job with their downtown, and I'd like to see something similar to that here. ... We didn't have George Washington, but we had Ran Rice, and that could be almost as good."

Pat Harvey Pharmacist at Girard Pharmacy
Girard

And that can help revitalize the town, said Wendy Naylor, of Naylor-Weisman Historic Preservation Consulting, based near Cleveland. The firm worked with the Lawrence Park Historical Society to get a National Register listing of the township’s original commercial and residential district, including some row houses, in 2003.

“What the National Register listing does is qualify income-producing buildings in the historic district for state and federal tax credits,” Naylor said. “The motivation behind the tax credits is to get those buildings back in use and generate business.”

One building rehabilitation sparks another, Naylor said. “Once you get one building rehabilitation going downtown, it’s contagious,” she said. “Others follow. It’s really fun to watch.”

The historical highpoint in all this downtown tourism, Naylor said: “You see that store that makes you unique to promote your town,” she said. “It becomes the basis for heritage tourism and just promoting the town as a wonderful historic community.”

Girard’s unique story includes that it once was the home of the Dan Rice Circus, who credited with creating the Uncle Sam character, voted the most popular showman in the mid-19th Century.

Very different histories are the bases for Waterford and North East National Register designations.

The North East Historic District includes Gibson Park, downtown commercial and residential buildings and the historic property that most recently was home to Mercyhurst North East.

The region’s agriculture, including grape farming and the wine industry, also helps boost tourism. North East is on the Erie Lake Erie Wine Trail, linking wineries from Harborcreek to Silver Creek, New York. The Sustain North East Initiative currently is seeking funding for new parks to increase downtown buildings and commercial tenants and improve streetscapes.

Waterford was the site of three French and Indian Wars era forts, including the French Fort LeBoeuf. The town also boasts the historic Eagle Hotel, Fort LeBoeuf and Jodens House museums, and Washington Park, featuring a statue commemorating George Washington’s visit to Fort LeBoeuf in 1753.

The Washington at a European dinner party for tourists, said Jim Edwards, president of Fort LeBoeuf Historical Society. “During the summer, there may be 20 people in the park one day and one or two the next, with cars pulling over to take pictures,” Edwards said. “It really draws people who come into the museum too and have lunch at the Eagle Hotel.”

Additional plans include erecting a monument honoring Civil War hero Strong Vincent, who was born and raised in Waterford.

That kind of historical promotion could help Girard, said Pat Harvey, a pharmacist at Girard Pharmacy. “I think Waterford has done a really nice job with their downtown, and I’d like to see something similar to that here,” Harvey said. “We have a historic past here also. We didn’t have George Washington, but we had Dan Rice, and that could be almost as good.”

Girard also erected the nation’s first monument to Civil War dead, in Girard’s downtown.

Empty storefronts are Girard’s biggest challenge, Harvey said. “We get plenty of traffic through town but we definitely need new businesses to get people in,” he said.

Downtown Girard Inc., a non-profit organization, is working with the borough to revitalize the town’s Main Street commercial district.

“Our main work is to organize the funding for downtown,” said Bustanegra George Bustanegra, chairman of Downtown Girard. “We have some grants available for residential homes along Main Street.”

National Register listing could help leverage additional funding and add additional interest in Girard, Bustanegra said. “I think if we’re able to get that and promote that, more people will visit the historical sites that we have,” he said.

Girard’s master plan will include a market analysis of its assets, historical and otherwise, and building and infrastructure strategy to promote downtown Girard to visitors, and guidelines to design building and infrastructure improvements and maintenance.

UC Borough Council hears update on Downtown Initiative project

BY MARYANN WOOL

UC Borough Council hears an update on Downtown Initiative project.

By Martin Johnson

Steve Bishop, project manager for the Union, City Community Foundation, and Art Demo, an arborist with the Western PA Conservancy (WPC), attended Union City Borough Council’s Feb. 9 meeting to explain the latest developments in the Union City Downtown Initiative project.

Union City Pride, along with the borough and Union City Community Foundation, had applied for a $250,000 Erie Community Foundation Shaping Tomorrow Grant to be used in the Downtown Initiative project.

"It’s all about creating an environment that entrepreneurs feel they can be successful and to make it enjoyable to shoppers,” Bishop said.

See Project, P2

More online

See video related to this story:
bit.ly/Girard_History

The plan will guide downtown preservation, rehabilitation and development for two decades, Strembort said. A $20,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission and a $10,000 grant from the Erie County Gaming Reinvestment Authority will fund planning costs.

Urban Vantage and Preservations Studios Buffalo, New York, have been hired to guide Girard planning and historic preservation. Urban Vantage will help prepare the downtown master plan. Preservation Studios will prepare the National Register nomination.

Girard Borough also is surveying residents about amenities, attractions and events that they’d like to see in their downtown. The survey is available on the borough’s website at www.girardborough.com.

“I also want the people who live here in Girard Borough to have what they want so they don’t have to leave the borough to shop or eat or attend an event,” Strembort said.

Public meetings will also be held to gather community ideas, he said. Some events will be held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We invite everyone to participate in the upcoming surveys, discussion, and other chances to be part of the planning process. The more ideas and comments, the better,” Strembort said.

Contact Tereza Myer at trmyer@eriemirror.com.

Project (Continued from front page)

Bishop explained the streetscape portion of the project will include placement of historical markers on North Main Street on either side of the Market Street crossing traffic light.

One will focus on Union City’s origins, another on the National Register of Historic Places designation. The other marker will focus on Union City’s furniture-making history.

The marker project is funded by Preservation Erie/erie County Gaming Reinvestment Authority and the Union City Community Foundation.

There will also be three sidewalk interpretative panels. One panel will focus on Union City’s furniture-making history; one will focus on French Creek’s importance to Union City’s origins and growth; and one will focus on downtown Union City’s historical architecture.

The panels project is funded by Union City Community Foundation and Union City Pride, with technical assistance from the Union City Historical Society.

For the trees project, WPC has identified potential sites, which will be planted on Ma Street, three on Main Street and three in the Alley area.

The plan is to plant 12 trees on Main Street.

Demeo discussed the site selection process and the tree-planting process. Members of Union City Pride have agreed to maintain all trees. Demeo will train them in how to water the trees for two years. While the trees will not be mulched, an additional planting will be done in the fall.

Funding for the tree project is through the Union City Pride Foundation and Art Communi Foundation, with technical assistance from the WPC.

Bishop was seeking Council’s approval to move forward with the project.

Following the present tree project, addition motion to move forward with the project at a meeting in mid-2021. He mentioned something Union City should pursue with the state for the future.

The plan is to come back to the borough for an easement plan.
Grants help aid Our West Bayfront’s success in Erie

Projects aim to boost quality of life in neighborhoods

When Michael Wolfe launched his equity-fueled redevelopment project on West Eighth Street, the 51-year-old had no idea that an active, well-funded neighborhood organization existed in that area.

He does now.

Wolfe and his wife Katie Raner moved to Erie from the Carlisle, Pa. area five years ago, looking to start fresh in "a smaller city that still had a hometown feel."

In late 2019, the couple purchased the building at 403 W. Eighth St. as an investment opportunity. It includes six one-bedroom apartments and housed on the first floor a restaurant in the Sky restaurant until it closed in early 2018.

"We're doing a lot of the work ourselves," said Wolfe, a former truck driver whose wife is an information technology professional.

"I think it was one of the contractors who told us about Our West Bayfront. We were able to get an $8,000 grant from them to put new windows into the building, and that really helped us out."

Wolfe said he and Raner, 50, hope to have all six apartments fully renovated and open a café with outdoor seating in the former restaurant space — within the next two years.

"I couldn't be happier that they're down here for the adjacent homeowners and the businesses," Wolfe said. "This city has some incredible buildings and areas in it. Sure it needs some help. But Erie is a really interesting place."

See BAYFRONT, Page 2A
Bayfront

Continued from Page 1A

Big moves for the neighborhood

Since launching in 2016, Our West Bayfront has been busy with projects throughout its service area. Nonprofit neighborhood organization focuses on improving the area from Presque Isle Bay south to West Sixth Street and from Sassafras Street west to the Bayfront Parkway.

Those initiatives include installing an 1,850-square-foot splash park at Bayview Park near West Seaside and Cherry streets that includes features which dump water from above, spray mist and bubble up from the ground; sidewalk improvements; hose rehabilitation; building renovations; enhanced neighborhood security cameras; lighting; community gardens; neighborhood cleanups; and public art.

Our West Bayfront unveiled its newest project on Feb. 5: a new headquarters in a 1,200-square foot building in the 400 block of West Eighth Street.

The building, constructed in 1982, hosts the Howard’s photography for decades but had fallen into disrepair and was vacant for years before Our West Bayfront purchased the property for $30,000 in 2018.

Our West Bayfront’s grant funding, since 2017, includes:
- $560,000 from the Erie Community Foundation
- $382,000 from the Erie County Gaming Reinvestment Authority
- Smaller grants from other groups, including the Erie Redevelopment Authority and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development

The group is also looking at state tax credit programs, such as a University for $75,000 each year for various programs and administrative costs.

"They helped make my place a lot better," said one resident, who received $7,900 in Our West Bayfront grants in 2020 for facade repairs, including new windows and doors at their home in the 300 block of Walnut Street.

Our West Bayfront has "made a big difference" in the neighborhood, said Williams, a west bayfront resident for more than 20 years. "The things they've done at Bayview Park, that's been one of the biggest improvements. Things are just a lot nicer."

"We have a plan"

Anna Prants, Our West Bayfront's executive director, said she believes the group's success in attracting grants can be attributed largely to its comprehensive plan for west bayfront neighborhoods, completed in 2016 that was heavily shaped by input from residents and businesses.

"That laid out a detailed community improvement strategy," Prants said. "Many of those initiatives have been completed or are underway."

"We have a plan, and we’re guided by that document," said Prants, whose name is still on the organization’s full.

"We had projects that we knew we wanted to get started on, and I think that we have been able to show how we will get them done and the ways we can leverage funding to get additional dollars."

Perry Wood agrees.

"As ECGRA’s executive director, Wood has seen and helped facilitate Our West Bayfront’s grant applications to the agency. ECGRA annually distributes millions of dollars in gross revenues from Presque Isle Downs & Casino into neighborhood associations and other nonprofit agencies for a range of programs, events and community improvements that benefit the public."

"We’ve been successful in earning a number of awards and funds to help fund Our West Bayfront’s improvement plans for the West Eighth Street business and retail corridor."

"That area includes Our West Bayfront’s newly-revamped office and the property that Wolfe and Reznor purchased."

"Their progress has been tremendous and that’s one of the reasons we continue to invest in them," Wood said.

Wood added that Our West Bayfront’s long-term plan also aligns with Erie Refocused, the city’s long-range comprehensive development plan, which addresses the city’s future. The plan also includes housing, including housing, transportation, land use and economic development.

"They’ve continually made focused investments, which is what Erie Refocused recommends," Wood said.

Engaging residents

Kellyon Falk, 26, helps Our West Bayfront make those connections, especially when it comes to youth — as one of the neighborhood group’s most active volunteers.

"I lived my whole life in the west bayfront," said Falk, who attended Penncrest Middle School, 330 W. Eighth St., who also lives in the area. "I’m lucky because I get to participate in a lot of Our West Bayfront activities as part of my job."

Falk has led youth fitness classes at Bayview Park, helped out with Thanksgiving dinners at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, and volunteered at the Erie Police Department’s annual Night Out events in Gridley Park on West Sixth Street, between Poplar and Fife streets. Falk said Our West Bayfront has given residents "the opportunity to be engaged" when it comes to community revitalization.

"What I’ve noticed is the kids like having something to do... And from what I’ve seen, a lot of the neighbors and the Gannon employees who live nearby get a chance to be involved and feel like they’re really a part of something."

"I think we’ve succeeded in creating more positive energy and a more positive perception of this neighborhood. We want to make it a place where people want to stay and an area that people want to move to."