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For more information or to discuss your organization's testing needs, contact Drug Guard at 610-285-4100 or [main@drug-guard.com](mailto:main@drug-guard.com).



*John DeWald and Matt Danner from Drug Guard at the 2026 NDASA Conference.*





PHOTO BY STEVE LADNER PHOTOGRAPHY

**Cover Story:** From its headquarters in Pottstown, the Transplant Alliance Foundation is turning love, loss, and resilience into lifesaving support for transplant families facing overwhelming financial and emotional burdens.



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Published by: MACnificent Pages, P.O. Box 334, Pottstown PA 19464-0334  
Subscribe online! [www.422bizmag.com](http://www.422bizmag.com)

Editor & Publisher – Bill Haley; Advertising Manager – Patti Seigel

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*Ken Lovely, Danielle Bailey, Dawn Steelman, and Amanda Belton*

PHOTOS BY STEVE LADNER PHOTOGRAPHY

# Love, Life, and Organ Donation

## The Growth and Generosity of the Transplant Alliance Foundation

By Michelle Seitzer

You may not think of an organ transplant as a love story. But after talking to Ken Lovely about his inspirational work with the Transplant Alliance Foundation, I believe there is no better way to see it.

From the loving decision to donate organs to the new life that such a gift provides, the process is marked by compromise and commitment — and full of risks and rewards.

The Foundation's entire history is actually built on the love story of Ken and Mary Jo, who met and married a few years after the sudden and unexpected death of Mary Jo's first husband in 1998.

In the face of her own loss, Mary Jo had restored the hope of new life for others by donating her first husband's organs. But her story didn't stop there: Mary Jo herself went on to become a two-time lung transplant recipient.

The first transplant was fairly straightforward financially thanks to Ken's excellent health insurance policy. However, throughout the process, Ken and Mary Jo learned about the high costs — many of them hidden and lesser known to the general public — of such a procedure.





*Attend the popular Mission Monday events where 100 percent of donations go directly to families in need!*

From lost income, hospital travel and inpatient time, extensive waiting periods, medication costs, the possibilities of rejection or a damaged organ, and so much more, the couple began to think about ways to help other families who did not have the same financial resources or coverage.

After her second transplant in June 2015 (following an illness that caused a rejection of her 2007 transplant), Ken recalls Mary Jo's instructions in the recovery room: "Start a foundation or you're sleeping outside tonight!"

### ***Building the Foundation***

The Transplant Alliance Foundation established their non-profit status and enjoyed tremendous growth thanks to her and Ken's outpouring of love and generosity to the families they served.

Despite innumerable ongoing health challenges for Mary Jo after her surgeries, her commitment to transplant advocacy remained steadfast. After Mary Jo passed away in 2021, the donations really began pouring in, Ken recalls.

*(Continued on page 8)*



*Bingo hall registration area*



*(Continued from page 7)*

Danielle Bailey, who serves as the Foundation's Chief Executive Officer and Board President, has been equally instrumental in its growth over the years. "I wanted to hit half a million by the end of 2025, when I planned to retire, but Danielle wanted to double that," Ken said. And that's what happened — by December 31st, they hit the \$1 million dollar milestone.

They've outgrown several different Bingo halls and spaces since the beginning, and their events continue to sell out and draw many new players, donors, and beneficiaries who are happy to support such a meaningful and vital cause.

### ***The Real Financial Burdens of Organ Transplants***

According to Ken, most families have to pay anywhere from \$5,000 to \$40,000 out of pocket — even with insurance coverage. Sometimes, out-of-pocket and associated costs can reach to \$100,000, a number that he and Mary Jo were faced with when her second lung transplant was required. At that time, Ken was self-employed and no longer had the same health insurance coverage as her first procedure.

As if those financial challenges aren't enough to bear while going through illnesses or injuries so significant they require an organ transplant, Ken said that many people cannot even get on a transplant list until they can show they have the \$5,000 to \$40,000 in the bank.

Getting on a list also doesn't mean the wait is over, or that the recipient's body will not reject the transplant. For most people, there is a two-month hospital stay after surgery — with daily observation for signs of rejection.

There are also medications required before and after surgery; some of which can cost upwards of \$2,000 per pill. Not all health insurance providers cover those expenses.

"We knew we couldn't fix insurance," said Ken. "But being able to give people money that makes a real difference — that's been so rewarding."



*The current event hall holds over 325 people!*





*Super Sunday Bingo, Wacky Wednesday Bingo, Throwback Thursday Bingo, Fabulous Friday Bingo... Join the fun at the Transplant Alliance Foundation's State Street Bingo Hall!*

## How Can YOU Help?

In the early days of the organization, Mary Jo and Ken had developed a variety of creative and innovative ways to generate donations and raise money for transplant families, from Ken's home-based Christmas light show to the first Bingo games with just a handful of people in attendance.

Now, they host popular Mission Monday events (where 100 percent of donations go directly to families in need), cash Bingo games, and fundraiser Bingo gatherings and giveaways at the current hall — which holds over 325 people.

Raffle baskets are largely paid for by generous members of the Foundation, so this is an area where the support of local businesses would be greatly appreciated, according to Ken.

The Foundation also sends out about 20,000 letters each quarter (which doesn't cost much on account of their charity status), but the response is minimal. "We're lucky if we get 20 replies," says Ken.

The Transplant Alliance Foundation welcomes any community partners, individuals, and businesses who want to join them in giving and supporting the work that Mary Jo and Ken started — to keep writing more stories of life, love, and organ donation.

For additional information, please contact Danielle Bailey, President / CEO, Transplant Alliance Foundation/Transplant Alliance Bingo, at 484-752-8073. Transplant Alliance Foundation is headquartered at 799 State Street, Pottstown, PA 19464. For additional information, please visit [www.TransplantAllianceBingo.com](http://www.TransplantAllianceBingo.com) and [www.TransplantAlliance.org](http://www.TransplantAlliance.org). Read more about donating and getting involved here: <https://www.transplantalliance.org/volunteer-opportunities/>

*Transplant Alliance Foundation, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit, mission is to spread awareness about Organ Donation by using our resources to publicly share our personal experiences. We do this through events, fundraising to help others in need and through volunteering. Our goal is to support as many people as we can who are waiting for a transplant, healing from their transplant and those that have become donor families.*





# GRCA 2026 ANNUAL DINNER RECAP

## FROM REJECTION TO ORBIT

Massimino  
Headlines GRCA  
Annual Dinner  
Honoring 70  
local Businesses

The Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) recently celebrated the vitality of the Berks County business community at its 113th Annual Dinner held at the Santander Arena.

More than 700 people gathered for the space-themed event.



*Mike Massimino, GRCA's keynote speaker and former NASA astronaut, relayed his time in space and what he learned to a crowd of more than 700 people.*

An advertisement for a GRCA event titled "GROWTH &amp; TRANSFORMATION". It features a man and a woman standing in a factory setting. The text reads: "INSPIRING STORIES FROM THE HEART OF BERKS COUNTY. Sixty years ago, Brentwood Industries started in a rented building outside Reading with two homemade thermoforming machines. Today, it's a global plastics manufacturer shipping engineered solutions to nearly 100 countries." There is a QR code and a call to action: "Scan code to read the whole story." The event is sponsored by Bell Media Group. The GRCA logo is at the bottom left.

### GRCA Launches Non-Profit Roundtable Series

Join the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) as it convenes non-profit professionals from across the community for its Non-Profit Roundtable — an interactive event focused on collaboration, connection and shared problem-solving.

This session brings leaders together in a true peer-to-peer environment, encouraging open dialogue rather than traditional presentations. Participants will have the opportunity to network, exchange ideas and engage in meaningful conversation about the challenges and opportunities shaping today's non-profit landscape.

The first roundtable will center on the role of community calendars, exploring how organizations can better coordinate efforts, increase visibility for events and minimize scheduling conflicts. Attendees will discuss best practices, identify gaps and consider new ways to streamline communication across the sector.

Whether you're looking to brainstorm solutions, share your experiences or simply connect with colleagues who understand the work you do, this roundtable offers a space to learn from one another and strengthen our collective impact. Attendees are encouraged to come ready to engage, contribute and leave with fresh perspectives and new connections.

**WHO:** Greater Reading Chamber Alliance

**WHAT:** Non-Profit Roundtable

**WHEN:** Wednesday, June 24, 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

**WHERE:** Center for Business Excellence, 49 Commerce Dr., Wyomissing

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** Registration required: \$50 for GRCA members. \$60 for future GRCA members. This event includes coffee, roundtable discussion and networking. Register at [greaterreading.org](http://greaterreading.org).



The evening began by instantly transporting attendees to the moon with a space-themed showcase featuring companies that have worked directly or indirectly with NASA. VIP Sponsors were treated to an exclusive experience, complete with signature cocktails delivered by a roaming robot named KettyBot, gourmet hors d'oeuvres and a photo opportunity with keynote speaker and former NASA Astronaut, Mike Massimino. As other guests arrived, they were welcomed by dancing and high fiving robot named PepperBot. The excitement continued with lively photo backdrops, the use of CatapalloVR's headsets to land a crashing spaceship and hang out in Reading Truck's speakeasy lounge. Smoke billowed and subwoofers shook the room to emulate a rocket launch.

During Massimino's 45-minute speech he recounted being rejected by NASA three times before finally being accepted into the 1996 astronaut class. He encouraged the audience to never crush the ideas of the new person on your team, even if they aren't good, because they'll be less likely to share when they have a good idea. He also reflected on his role in a complex repair of the Hubble Space Telescope, encouraging the audience to trust their tools, training and team when facing high-pressure challenges.

"You never know when innovation is going to come," he said.



**Category 1 winners Eric Unger (middle left) and Barry Unger (middle right) celebrate Vision Mechanical Inc.'s win with GRCA COO Sally Stewart and Jeff Rush, Chairman of the Board.**

During one of the many lighthearted moments from his speech, Massimino talked about sending the first tweet from space.

"Take that, Neil Armstrong!" he recalled thinking.

Shortly after, he received an email from his kids learning that not only their friends and they were making fun of him, but also the comedians on Saturday Night Live's Weekend Update.

The evening continued with recognizing the 50 companies that made up the Business Excellence Awards in Category 1. Vision Mechanical, Inc., Irish Creek Construction, and Mail Shark took the top

three spots. The honored businesses in Category 1 are for-profit companies, with revenues of at least \$1 million in each of the past three fiscal years.

Twenty small businesses were recognized in Category 2 with Blades of Steel Landscaping, Bime Beauty and Disc Centers of America making up the top three. The recognized companies in Category 2 are for-profit businesses, with revenues of at least \$250,000 in each of the past three fiscal years.

"The Annual Dinner was a strong reflection of the innovation and forward momentum across the Greater Reading business community," said Jeff Rush, Chairman of the board. "With a nod to exploration and discovery, the evening highlighted businesses that are leading the way and setting a high standard for growth in Berks County."

The Platinum Sponsor of the event was JPMorgan Chase & Co. and the Diamond Sponsor was Shuman Development Group.

**GRCA**

**GREATER READING**  
Chamber Alliance

**ABOUT THE GREATER READING CHAMBER ALLIANCE:** Our mission is with excellent and committed leadership and coordination, we: attract new businesses to our community, support the businesses that are already here, nurture local start-ups, develop the workforce for today and the future, and advocate on behalf of the business community.



**Category 2 winners Doug and Rachel Brown of Blades of Steel Landscaping celebrate with GRCA COO Sally Stewart and Jeff Rush, Chairman of the Board.**

## 2026 GRCA DINNER BUSINESS EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

### Category 1

1. Vision Mechanical, Inc.
2. Irish Creek Construction
3. Mail Shark
4. Grant Manufacturing & Alloying, Inc.
5. Halter Landscaping, Inc.
6. Singer Equipment Company
7. Diamond Credit Union
8. JB Plumbing HVAC & Construction
9. Levan Machine & Truck Equipment
10. Ethosource, LLC
11. Wyatt Seating
12. D&S Elite Construction, Inc.
13. Discovery FCU
14. Sense of Peace Home Care
15. Fraser Advanced Information Systems
16. Unique Pretzel Bakery, Inc.
17. Customers Bank
18. RKL, LLP
19. Rothenberger Insurance Services, LLC
20. REMAX of Reading
21. East Penn Manufacturing Company
22. Betterview Counseling and Trauma Recovery, LLC
23. Berkshire Systems Group, Inc.
24. Stony Creek Rentals, Inc.
25. New Castle Lawn & Landscape
26. Blatt Construction, Inc.
27. Solve IT Solutions, LLC
28. Advanced Comfort Specialists, Inc.
29. Fromm
30. Entech Engineering, Inc.
31. Spotts Insurance Group
32. Smith Bukowski
33. Financial Planning Advisors, Inc.
34. Kozloff Stoudt Attorneys
35. Kitay Law Offices
36. Muhlenberg Greene Architects, LTD.
37. Catering by John Lowe
38. Moselem Springs Golf Club
39. Reading Royals
40. Van Scoy Jewelers
41. Bell Tower Salon Spa
42. Santander Arena and Santander Performing Arts Center
43. Retro Fitness Kenhorst
44. Reading Truck Body, LLC
45. D&S Portable Toilets, LLC
46. Brentwood Industries, Inc.
47. Descco Design & Construction, Inc.
48. Ronnie C. Folk Paving, Inc.
49. Reading Truck Equipment, LLC
50. Phytogenx, Inc.

### Category 2

1. Blades of Steel Landscaping
2. Bime Beauty
3. Disc Centers of America
4. Blinds and Designs
5. FXV Digital Design
6. Uncorkd
7. Lausch's Moving Company
8. Archwood Soapery
9. Berks Digital, Inc.
10. Three Hive Studios
11. Empowerment Behavioral Health, LLC
12. Gilded Design Studio
13. Bell Media Group
14. Interlace Communications, Inc.
15. Jeff Martin, Century 21 Gold
16. LJ's Fitness
17. Parcon Cleaning Services
18. Moyer-Drabick & Associates, LTD
19. Inspired Wellness, LLC
20. Ignite Martial Arts



# GRCA 2026 ANNUAL DINNER RECAP

Business Excellence Category 1 Winner #19

## ROTHENBERGER INSURANCE SERVICES

*Your Business Is Changing.  
Is Your Insurance Keeping Up?*

By Ron Rothenberger, Owner,  
Rothenberger Insurance Services

You probably didn't start the year planning for your business to change. But somewhere along the way, new software was added, employees started using AI tools, vendors gained access to systems, people began working differently, and operations evolved. Most business owners don't think twice about those changes because they feel normal. What often gets overlooked is whether their insurance and risk conversations evolved at the same pace.

Years ago, insurance reviews focused mostly on buildings, vehicles, and equipment. Today, some of the biggest exposures are harder to see. A file uploaded into a free AI platform, a vendor outage that stops operations, remote access from multiple locations, or expanded services

can create unexpected gaps. That doesn't mean businesses should slow down or avoid technology. It means taking time to make sure protection reflects how the business actually operates today, not how it operated three years ago.

The strongest businesses I work with are not waiting for something to go wrong before asking questions. They review changes before renewal and look at risk as part of growth planning, not paperwork. Should your business look different today than it did a year ago, now is a smart time to have a conversation and make sure your coverage is keeping pace with where you're headed.

Give Rothenberger Insurance Services a call at 610.406.5827 or 610.685.2804 or schedule a time to meet at <https://risquote.com/contact-us/>.



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**Could Your Business Benefit From an AI Agent?**

AI Agents are digital team members trained to support your business so you and your team can focus on what truly matters.

**5 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

- 1 What work do we repeat every day?
- 2 Where are projects slowing down?
- 3 What questions does our team answer repeatedly?
- 4 What knowledge would our business lose if one person retired, left, or become unavailable?
- 5 What work pulls skilled employees away from higher value activities?

These questions uncover opportunities you already know exist—but haven't had time to address.

**AI Agents are designed to:**

- Improve consistency so your business runs smoothly.
- Save time by automating and streamlining everyday work.
- Free Up Your Team for work that requires judgment, creativity, and human connection.

The question may not be whether AI Agents belong in business. It may be which role you would assign first.

Ready to explore what an AI Agent could look like in your business?  
**Let's start the conversation.**

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Business Excellence Category 2 Winner #14

## INTERLACE COMMUNICATIONS

### Could Your Business Benefit from an AI Agent? 5 Questions to Consider

Business owners have spent years adding software to solve problems. Today, AI Agents are beginning to provide a different approach. Instead of being another tool that waits for instructions, AI Agents are designed to carry out specific responsibilities tailored to your business. Think of AI Agents as a digital team trained to support areas of your business, whether that means brainstorming ideas with you, helping customers find information, organizing your team's knowledge, creating content, guiding follow up, identifying opportunities, or recommending next steps.

Before exploring AI Agents, I encourage leaders to begin with these five questions: 1) What work do we repeat every day? 2) Where are projects slowing down? 3) What questions does our team answer repeatedly?

4) What knowledge would our business lose should one key person retire, leave, or become unavailable? 5) What work pulls skilled employees away from higher value activities? These questions often uncover opportunities that business owners already know exist but have not taken time to address.

The businesses benefiting most from AI are not necessarily the largest or the most technical. They are the ones taking time to build intentionally and fill gaps thoughtfully. AI Agents are designed to improve consistency, save time, and create more space for work that requires judgment, creativity, and human connection. The question may not be whether AI Agents belong in business. It may be which role you would assign first. Should you be curious about what an AI Agent could look like in your business, I would love to continue the conversation. Contact Alyse Mitten at Interlace Communications at 484.709.6564 or [alyse@icconnect.com](mailto:alyse@icconnect.com).

P.S. Did I have help? Yes, Frannie helped





## *Personalized design for businesses and homes since 2011*

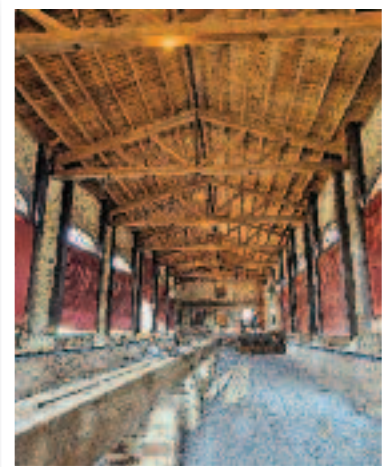
**Did you know?** Close by in southern Berks County, Village Architecture & Preservation, LLC is your neighborhood full-service design firm. We prioritize community, history, and sustainability in helping property owners grow and improve their homes and businesses. VA&P's specialty is creative solutions for unique building challenges prioritizing long-term building use, efficiency, and maintenance concerns.

**Community-focused design.** After specializing in historic preservation design for over a decade, Jessica Zeigler-Cihlar founded VA&P in the 1820s home of Lionville Village Historic District's former cabinet maker. Now based in Caernarvon Township, in the former Jones Mine Village Schoolhouse, VA&P draws on over 25 years of both personal and professional experience in architectural and historic preservation design, serving our

neighbors throughout the Tri-County area. We collaborate with our clients to identify the needs of their families, customers, and building users, to create more enjoyable, functional, and safe spaces to live, work, and play.

**Let's work together.** Do you own a home needing a fresh look or expansion? A business needing fitout or adaptive reuse design? A school or church needing efficiency or accessibility upgrades? Or a historical building needing updates? VA&P can help. Our key professional services include: Schematic Designs for project budgeting; Construction Documents for building permit approvals; Code Compliance Summaries for identifying necessary upgrades in renovation projects; and Condition Assessment Reports for repairing and maintaining historic structures.

**Now Celebrating our 15th Anniversary.** Village Architecture & Preservation recently became a limited liability corporation and is a certified WBENC and SBA Women-Owned Small Business. Through collaborative relationships with talented builders and specialized design consultants, VA&P assembles a personalized, experienced team to meet your project's needs, providing exceptional, custom designs and documentation to achieve your goals. Exciting local projects include: *Salon Aspire* Fitout, *Rhoads Opera* Restaurant and Market, *Union Township* Municipal Complex Meeting Room Rehabilitation, *Althouse Arboretum* Greenhouse Classroom, *Crucial Cuts* Barbershop and Salon fitout, *Little Mates*



*Child Development Center Renovation, Lansdale Freight House Rehabilitation, Heller Homestead Park Open Space and Barn Restoration Master Plan* (consulting role), and numerous residential projects throughout Berks, Montgomery, and Chester Counties.

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# GRCA 2026 ANNUAL DINNER RECAP

Business Excellence Category 1 Winner #9

## LEVAN MACHINE & TRUCK EQUIPMENT

### A Tradition Of Excellence For Over 89 Years!

Since it's humble beginnings in 1936, through good times and bad and everything in between, Levan Machine & Truck Equipment headquartered in Fleetwood, PA, just outside of Reading, has adapted with the demands of its customers and expanded its product lines and services over the years, and today it is recognized as one of the top 50 businesses based in Berks County.

Levan Machine and Truck Equipment is a one-stop, full-service machine shop and work truck and van upfitter, for all things related to CNC machining and commercial vehicle upfitting. Since 1936 their machine shop has serviced customers throughout the United States and internationally. From custom repair and manufacturing machining and fabricating, to prototyping, to welding, to com-

pletely engineered projects, Levan Machine and Truck Equipment is a job shop that specializes in custom work.

In 2010, Levan launched their Commercial Truck Upfit division which services the commercial and fleet market throughout Pennsylvania and the northeast. Their highly qualified, experienced team builds a commercial truck or van specific to your daily work needs. Whether you need a service, platform, crane, or dump body, snowplow or spreader, liftgate, central hydraulic system, or power take-off (PTO), Levan's truck experts are trained to build a truck that will increase your efficiency and get the job done safely. They also offer general truck repair, maintenance, and inspection, plus they provide after-market truck accessories/parts, including spray liner.

Levan Machine and Truck Equipment has an extensive selection of truck products and primarily serves customers with

commercial vehicles from Class 1 up to Class 8. The team at Levans listens to their customers before, during and after the sale is complete. They work hard to ensure they build a truck to meet your daily work needs, and if you aren't sure what you need, they'll help you figure it out. Levans has several great relationships with commercial auto and truck dealers and can help facilitate the buying process too. They specialize in truck bodies, van solutions, toolboxes, mobile power solutions, lift solutions, hydraulic systems, specialty lighting, and crane systems.

As the company continues to expand its product lines and services, it remains focused on the fundamentals of providing exceptional customer service and quality. "Communication is key," said Brian Levan, President and CEO and third-generation owner. "Listening to and understanding the customer is the foundation of our company and our

vision for the future. We have a mindset throughout the company that every customer is a priority, and really what it comes down to is we are here to serve them. We are not just that truck shop or machine shop. We combine the two. When we build the custom truck for exactly what a customer needs, if we can't buy a part, we have the full capabilities of machining or making anything we want and make it work to what you need," he said. "We are also proud to tell our customers that we service everything we sell," said Levan.



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**Business Excellence Category 1 Winner #36**

## MUHLENBERG GREENE ARCHITECTS

Muhlenberg Greene Architects (MG Architects), established in 1920, has been a cornerstone in Berks County, Pennsylvania, offering comprehensive architectural design, planning, and construction management services. The firm's leadership team embodies a hands-on approach, ensuring projects are both innovative and practical.

The three principals at Muhlenberg Greene Architects—Scott O. Graham, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, NCARB; Robert B. Conklin, AIA, NCARB; and James A. Sarro, AIA, LEED AP BD+C—form an exceptional leadership team that seamlessly blends sophisticated, educated design with deep construction expertise. With decades of combined experience, they bring a refined architectural vision rooted in technical precision, sustainability, and practical buildability.

Scott Graham is a leader in sustainable design and Building Information Modeling, ensuring projects are forward-thinking and environmentally responsible. Robert Conklin's extensive experience in documentation and construction administration makes him a vital link between concept and execution, fostering



strong relationships with contractors. Jim Sarro's expertise in adaptive reuse and municipal planning brings a unique perspective that balances historical integrity with modern functionality.

Together, they champion a collaborative and construction-friendly approach, ensuring that each project is as structurally sound and efficiently built as it is aesthetically compelling.

In recent developments, MG Architects has relocated to a permanent office at 1268 Penn Avenue, Wyomissing, PA 19610. This strategic move enhances their ability



to serve the local community and underscores their commitment to the region. The new location offers a centralized base for clients and staff, facilitating better collaboration and accessibility. This transition marks a significant milestone in the firm's century-long history, reinforcing their dedication to shaping the built environment of Berks County.

For those seeking a collaborative and experienced architectural partner, MG Architects invites you to contact them to discuss your upcoming project needs.

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Our landscape service comes in many forms from maintenance, to design and installation. We offer proper pruning of shrubs, garden restoration and installation, drainage, weeding and mulching, landscape light installation, water features, hardscapes from pathways to large patios and stone walls, stream side restoration, erosion management, and invasive pest management.

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Today, Magic Memories proudly continues to provide a loving, home-like atmosphere for all families and children. With individualized teacher attention and a play-based curriculum, the program is dedicated to creating a learning experience that supports each child's growth at their own unique pace.

In March 2026, Magic Memories

celebrated its 20th anniversary. Having expanded to seven locations, we now serve families across Chester and Montgomery Counties. We offer care for infants through pre-kindergarten, as well as before and after school programs and a summer camp.

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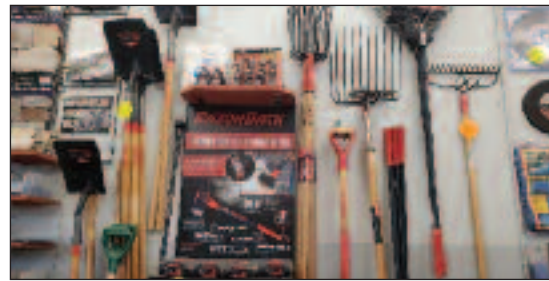


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Now led by husband-and-wife team Ian and Lindsay Cressman, both lifelong members of the Pottstown community, Conestoga Stone remains focused on delivering the personalized experience that has defined the company since its beginning. Their vision for the future centers on strengthening local relationships, supporting community initiatives, and continuing to provide the kind of reliable, neighborly service that keeps clients returning year after year.



As Conestoga Stone looks ahead to 2026 and beyond, the company remains committed to helping families, businesses, and contractors bring their outdoor projects to life while continuing to grow alongside the community it proudly serves. Community members are encouraged to stop by, explore the yard, and meet the new ownership team. Whether planning a small backyard



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Conestoga Stone is located at 1101 Ridge Road, Pottstown, PA 19465. For additional information, please call 610.656.6466 and visit [www.conestogastone.com](http://www.conestogastone.com).



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# AI FOR SMALL BUSINESS: WHERE TO START WITHOUT WASTING TIME OR MONEY



## TECHNOLOGY

By Marc Umstead,  
Plus One Technology

If you feel like everyone is talking about AI but nobody is explaining how to use it in your

business, you are not alone. Most small business owners are not struggling with a lack of tools. You are struggling with one simple question: "Where do we even begin?"

This article will walk you through a practical, no-hype approach to getting started with AI in a business with five to 200 employees. No jargon. No shiny object syndrome. Just a clear path forward that improves how your business runs.

### The Real Goal of AI (It's Not What You Think)

AI is not about replacing your team. It is about removing friction from your workflows.

Think about your day: Repetitive emails. Manual data entry. Chasing information between systems. Answering the same questions repeatedly. AI shines when it improves these processes. But here is the catch. If your workflows are messy, AI will just help you make mistakes faster. That is why step one is not buying a tool.

### Step 1: Document Your Current Workflows (Yes, Really)

Before you touch Aim you need clarity. You need to answer: How does work get done today? Who is involved at each step? Where are the bottlenecks? What steps are repeated daily or weekly? This is not busy work. This is the foundation.

A simple way to start: Pick one process like onboarding a new client. Write down every step from start to finish. Identify who touches it. Note where delays or errors happen. Most businesses discover something surprising at this stage.

(Continued on page 20)

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## TECHNOLOGY

(Continued from page 19)

No one agrees with how the process works. This is normal. It is also exactly why AI projects fail when companies skip this step.

### Step 2: Involve Your Team (They Know More Than You Think)

AI should not be a top-down decision. Your team lives inside these workflows every day. They know: What slows them down. What is repetitive. What drives them a little crazy. Bring them into the conversation: Ask what tasks they would automate first? Ask where mistakes happen most often? Ask what would save them 30 minutes a day? You are not just gathering input. You are building buy-in. And that matters because AI only works when people use it.

### Step 3: Identify the Right Opportunities for AI

Not every process needs AI. Focus on workflows that are: Repetitive; Time-consuming; Rules-based; Prone to human error. Examples: Customer follow-ups; Data entry between systems; Document generation; Internal knowledge look up. If a task requires deep human judgment or creativity, AI may assist but should not

replace the process.

### Step 4: Build vs Buy (The Decision Everyone Gets Wrong)

This is where things can go sideways quickly. You have two main options:

**Option 1: Buy (Most Common)** Use existing AI tools that are already built. Pros: Faster to implement; Lower upfront cost; Supported and updated regularly. Cons: Less customization; May not fit perfectly.

**Option 2: Build (More Control, More Complexity)**

Create custom AI solutions tailored to your workflows. Pros: Designed specifically for your business; Can integrate deeply with your systems. Cons: Higher cost; Longer timeline; Requires ongoing management.

### The Reality for Most Small Businesses

Start with buying. Then customize later if needed. Trying to build too early is like designing a custom race car before you learn how to drive.



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#### Step 5: Why a Consultant Can Save You Thousands

This is where many businesses hesitate. "Can't we just figure this out ourselves?" You can. But there is a cost. Time, mistakes, and choosing the wrong tools. A good technological partner helps you: Map work-

flows correctly. Identify the best use cases for AI. Avoid overbuying or underbuying tools. Integrate AI into your existing systems. At Plus 1 Technology, this is how we approach every engagement. We focus on aligning technology with how your business operates, not forcing tools into your workflow.

If you want to explore what that looks like, you can start here: <https://www.plus1technology.com>

#### Step 6: AI Is Not "Set It and Forget It"

This might be the most important part. AI is not a one-time project. It requires: Ongoing adjustments; Feedback from your team; Continuous improvement. Think of it like training a new employee. You would not expect perfection on day one. You refine, adjust, and improve over time. The businesses that win against AI are not the ones that implement it first. They are the ones that keep improving it.

#### A Simple Example

Let's say your team manually responds to common customer inquiries. Instead of jumping straight to an AI chatbot, you would: Document on how responses are handled today. Gather common questions and answers. Standardized responses. Identify where delays happen. Then introduce AI to assist or automate. Now AI is built on a solid foundation.

#### The Bottom Line

AI is powerful. But it is not magic. If you remember nothing else, remember this: Start with your workflows. Involve your team. Focus on real business problems. Choose tools carefully. Improve continuously.

Do that, and AI becomes a competitive advantage instead of an expensive experiment.

Not Sure Where to Start? That is normal. If you want help mapping your workflows and identifying where AI can make an impact, start with a conversation. For additional information, please call 610.792.5660 and visit [www.plus1technology.com](http://www.plus1technology.com).



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- Reignite Your Story

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## THREE FIERCE AI TIPS TO RESET, REFOCUS, AND RISE THIS JUNE



**By Deborah Ann Spence, Fiercepreneur**

June is the midpoint — the mirror month. Half the year's behind you, and the other half's waiting to see what you're really made of.

This is where most people slow down. But not you. This is your chance to reset the systems, fix what's not working, and recommit to the dream with more focus and less forced energy.

Here's how to use AI this month to breathe life back into your goals and push your business into its next chapter — stronger, sharper, and more peaceful than ever.

### Reflect Like a CEO, Not a Critic

You've done more than you think. Before you chase the next goal, stop and measure your wins. Use AI to analyze your performance: your top sales months, your highest engagement posts, your best client results. Ask it to summarize what worked — and what didn't — so you can adjust your next six months with clarity, not emotion.

You can't grow if you're always running from what's already happened.

**Fierce Truth:** Reflection is strategy. Rest is strength.

### Rebuild the Routine

Mid-year burnout is real. And when you lose structure, you lose momentum. Use AI to help you rebuild your routine — plan your content calendar, schedule breaks, and set reminders that support your real life, not overwhelm it.

Let AI balance the hustle with humanity. Use it to protect your peace *and* your productivity — because both matter.

**Fierce Truth:** You don't need more grind. You need better rhythm.

### Reignite Your Story

By June, your audience starts tuning out unless you give them something *real*. Use AI to help you find your next message — one rooted in truth, emotion, and transformation. Feed it your client testimonials, your origin story, or your latest lesson learned, and let it help you craft a powerful narrative that reconnects your people to your purpose.

Your story is your superpower — update.

**Fierce Truth:** Consistency builds awareness. Authenticity builds trust.

### Final Thought

June isn't a pause — it's a pivot. It's where leaders separate from dreamers. Take the time to reflect, rebuild, and reignite — and let AI take care of the noise while you focus on your next breakthrough.

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## Advantage Auto Tags and Insurance

As a dedicated one-stop resource for vehicle licensing and comprehensive insurance solutions, Advantage Auto Tags and Insurance brings together convenience and coverage under one roof. Based in Langhorne (and serving Temple, Pennsylvania), the business handles everything from PA title and registration services to auto tags, boat and ATV registration, and driver's licensing needs. Recognizing that managing vehicle paperwork can be time-consuming, they aim to streamline the process so customers can get on the road with confidence and ease.

Beyond registration services, the agency stands out in offering a wide array of insurance options. As an independent, full-service insurance agency, it grants access to more than 14 top-rated personal lines carriers and over 80 commercial providers. With over three decades of industry experience among its leadership, the agency emphasizes that "We don't work for the insurance companies — we

work for YOU." This independence allows them to tailor solutions across auto, home, life, business, and specialty lines, giving clients choice and support.

What makes the agency particularly compelling is their dual focus: one, on simplifying and supporting vehicle-related regulatory tasks that often frustrate customers; and two, on delivering insurance advocacy, coverage clarity, and long-term service. Whether you're registering

a newly purchased vehicle, transferring a title, or shopping for bundles of insurance protection, clients benefit from both efficient licensing services and personalized insurance guidance. With offices in Bucks County and a commitment to being local and trusted, Advantage Auto Tags and Insurance positions itself as a go-to partner for both paperwork and protection.

For additional information, please contact Greg Kramer, Managing Partner, at 215.860.6510.




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# SURVEYMONKEY MEETS CLAUDE: THE CONNECTED WORKSPACE



## MARKETING TIPS

By Brandon Rost,  
CEO, beMarketing

You did not invest in AI tools to spend your day copying and pasting text across browser tabs.

Yet, for a lot of marketers, that is exactly what the daily workflow looks like: brainstorming in an AI chat, switching to your survey platform to build a feedback form, hopping back to the AI to tweak copy, and downloading CSVs for analysis. This fragmented process drains your productivity. The era of isolated SaaS tools is ending, and the connected AI command center is taking over. With SurveyMonkey's new integration directly into Claude, you no longer have to waste time managing your tech stack instead of doing actual work.

## Eliminating the Context Switching Tax

Software platforms are transitioning away from being standalone utilities for single tasks. We used to treat digital strate-



gy like an assembly line, where you carried the mental load of moving information from a brainstorming tool to an execution tool, and finally to a data analysis station. That assembly line is finally collapsing into a single workspace. SurveyMonkey's integration with Claude is the prime example of this shift, allowing you to create surveys, analyze responses, and surface insights natively inside your Claude conversation.

(Continued on page 26)

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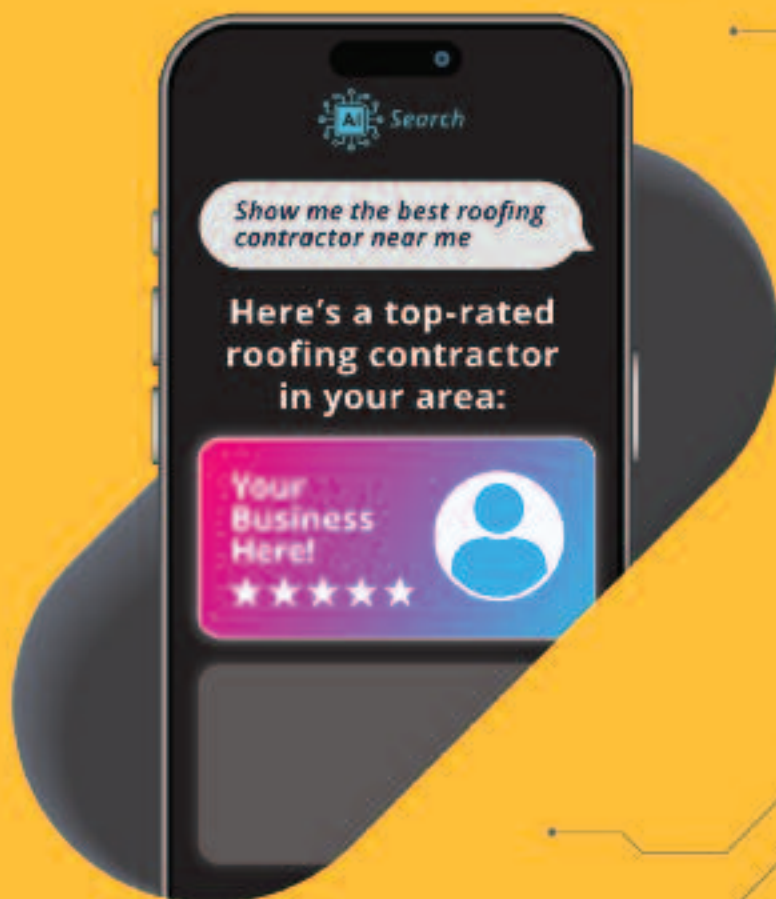
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## MARKETING TIPS

(Continued from page 25)

### Why the Old AI Playbook is Broken

Most teams are treating generative AI like a glorified typewriter. You ask it for ideas, but you still carry out the manual labor of execution. If your entire workflow relies on leaving your AI workspace to manually build, send, and analyze surveys, you are losing valuable time. With the SurveyMonkey and Claude integration, execution happens exactly where you are already working. You simply type a request to create a market validation survey for a new product concept, and Claude builds it directly into your SurveyMonkey account. If a question sounds stiff, tell Claude to fix it. If you need to send it out, ask Claude to generate the link. The entire feedback loop becomes conversational, completely eliminating the need to jump between different apps.

### Marketing That Works for the Future

This powerful integration changes how marketers, CX teams, and researchers will operate moving forward by allowing you to:

- **Optimize for execution:** You want your tools to actually do the work. Bringing SurveyMonkey into Claude means you

can go from a rough concept to a live research project in a matter of minutes.

- **Prioritize real human opinions:** AI can guess what your customers want, but it cannot replace their actual voices. The smartest marketers will use this integration to pull live sentiment and direct customer quotes straight into your strategy documents.

- **Control your workflow:** Speed is your competitive advantage when your platforms connect seamlessly. You do not have to wait for a data analyst to crunch the numbers. You simply ask Claude to summarize the open-ended survey themes, and the live data is handed right to you.

### The Bottom Line

Growth requires adaptation. If you are stuck trying to find the perfect prompt to generate blog text, you are missing a massive opportunity. The brands that win this era will be the ones that stop focusing on isolated AI generation and start prioritizing AI orchestration. Connecting SurveyMonkey to Claude represents the end of fragmented workflows. It is time to drop the busywork, close the feedback loop faster, and start building strategies backed by real human voices.

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# CREATING SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT WITH AI



## SOCIAL MEDIA TIPS

By Theresa Mintzer

Do you struggle with ideas for your social media content? Try using AI tools like ChatGPT or Claude for

suggestions. It's an excellent starting point for brainstorming posts, captions, reels, blog ideas, and more. AI can also help write drafts for your content. One thing to remember when using AI is that the responses can sometimes feel generic. In 2026, the most successful content creators are using AI to save time while still keeping their own personality and storytelling at the center of their content.

Another way to use AI for content creation is with tools like Minvo. Minvo, will create short-form videos for YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Minvo will automatically turn longer videos into branded clips and highlight content based on keywords you provide.

Creating social media graphics is time consuming. Canva is a popular design tool for presentations, videos, and social media graphics. The paid version, Canva Pro,



offers additional templates, branding tools, and AI features that will save you even more time.

There are many AI-powered tools available today to help streamline content creation. Always keep your ideal customer in mind when creating content and have fun experimenting with these new tools.

Need help putting this into practice? I offer social media coaching to guide you through the process. Visit [mintzersolutions.com](https://mintzersolutions.com) to learn more and schedule a session.

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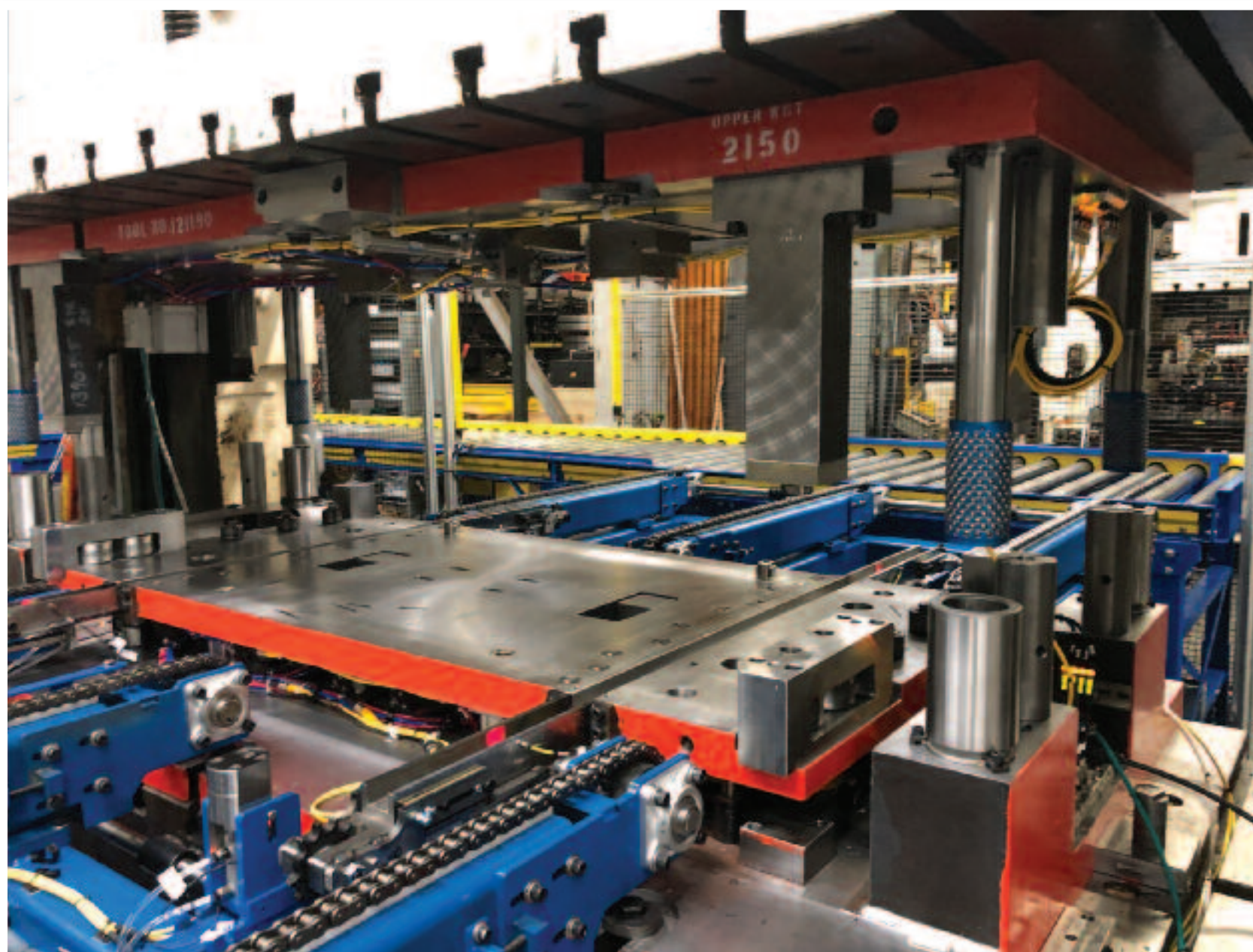


**RICHARD AND COLE MARANDO**

# MARANDO INDUSTRIES: GEARING UP FOR THE RETURN OF AMERICAN MANUFACTURING

**T**here's a growing national conversation around the return of manufacturing to the United States. In many ways, it's already happening — but not in the same form as it once did.

Today's environment demands tighter labor markets, higher quality standards, and systems that run reliably day after day. Bringing production back requires more than location; it requires reliable, scalable processes that perform. That's where Marando Industries comes in. A family-owned business based in Reading, Berks County, Marando has become the regional partner manufacturers turn to for practical automation solutions.

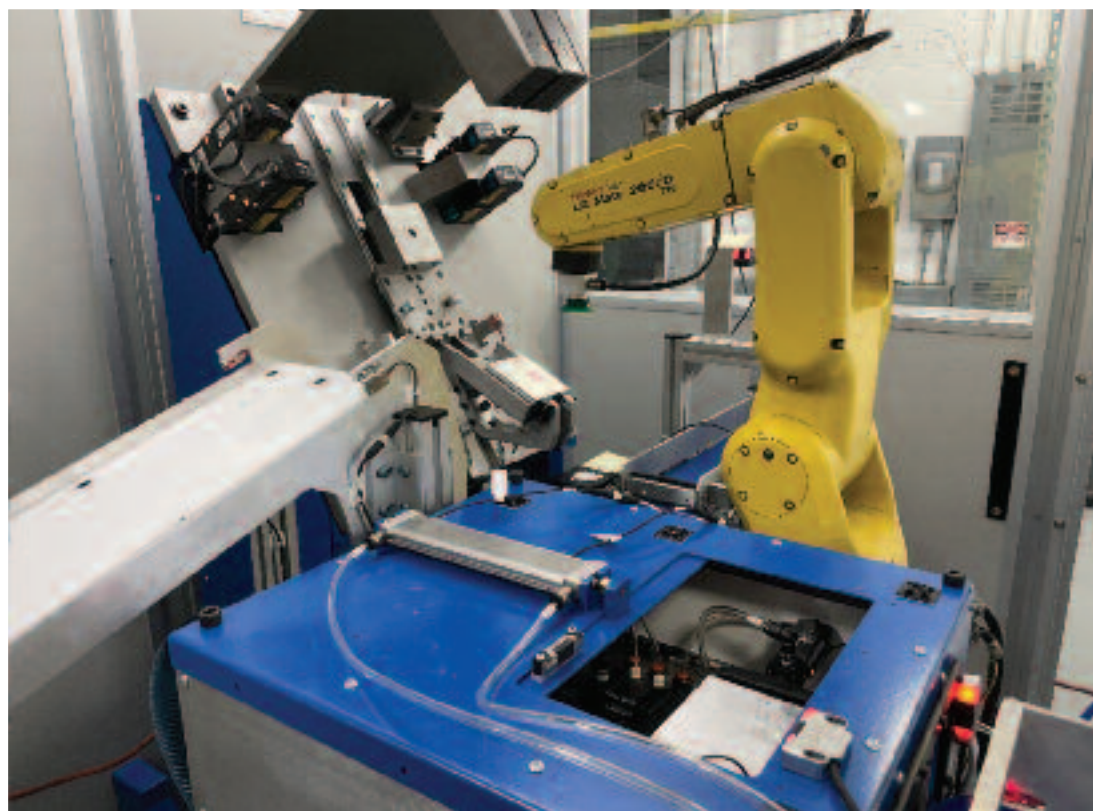






Founded in 2006 by father-and-son Penn State engineers Richard and Cole Marando, the company combines deep industry experience with cutting-edge innovation. Richard's background at Dana Corporation and Cole's dual mechanical and electrical engineering expertise launched what has grown into a trusted provider of custom systems serving the Route 422 corridor and Mid-Atlantic region.

From their Reading facility, Marando delivers turn-key industrial automation: custom machinery design and build, robotic process cells, material handling, welding and assembly systems, and collaborative robotics. As a FANUC Authorized System Integrator and OMCA Beveling Master Distributor, the team uses a mechatronics-first approach—starting with thorough upfront design, process understanding, and a focus on long-term reliability. With more than 30 years of collective experience and over 350 successful projects, they serve diverse manufacturers in automotive, primary metals, medical, electronics, construction, and beyond.

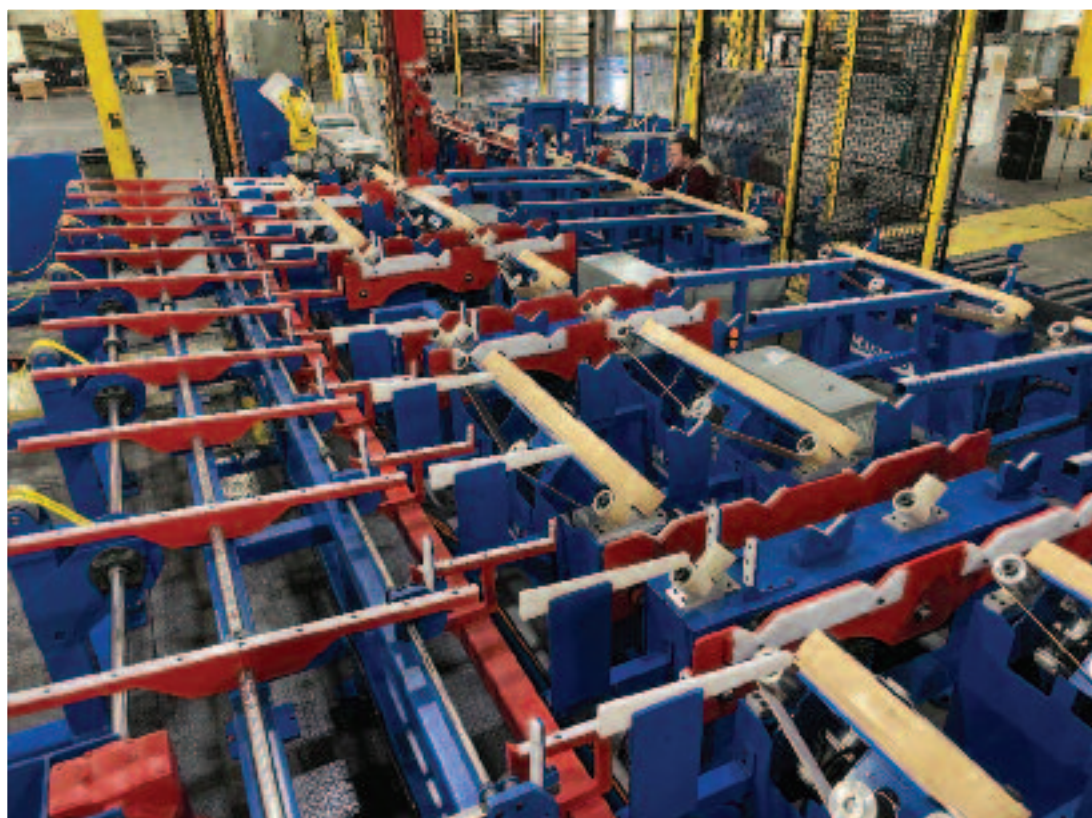


What sets Marando apart is their end-to-end commitment and local presence. The multidisciplinary team—spanning design, fabrication, controls, and programming—invests in advanced tools to move efficiently from concept to commissioning.

Their Reading location means fast on-site support for installation, maintenance, troubleshooting, and parts—advantages distant providers can't match. The result: systems that integrate seamlessly and deliver consistent performance in real production environments.

As American manufacturing evolves, Marando Industries is helping regional companies thrive. Their solutions turn manual processes into smart, reliable automation that boosts productivity, reduces downtime, and improves profitability—building the foundation for what's next.

For more information or to discuss your next project, contact Richard Marando at 610.621.2536, ext. 700, or [rich@marando-inc.com](mailto:rich@marando-inc.com). Visit [www.marando-inc.com](http://www.marando-inc.com).





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North End Florist is located at 403 N. Charlotte Street, Pottstown, PA 19464. For additional information, please call 610.327.4447 and visit [www.northendflorist.com](http://www.northendflorist.com).



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## GRCA ROUNDUP

# GREATER READING CHAMBER ALLIANCE

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Situational Leadership Bootcamp: Adapting Your Style for Success\*

June 4

9 a.m.-4 p.m.

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\$495/person- Future GRCA Members  
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### Family Business Alliance Built Different: Inside a Family Business that Lasts

June 17

5 p.m.-6:30 p.m.

Heeb's Surplus, Inc.  
1164 Park Road, Reading  
\$35/person- GRCA Members;  
\$50/person- Future GRCA Members  
Register at [Greaterreading.org/heebys](http://Greaterreading.org/heebys)

### Berks Women2Women: Lobsterfest

June 18

5:30 p.m.-8 p.m.

Go Fish! Seafood Market & Sushi Bar  
301 S. Hull St., Sinking Spring  
\$130/person- GRCA Members (all inclusive);  
\$150/person- Future GRCA Members (all inclusive)  
Register at [Greaterreading.org/lobster](http://Greaterreading.org/lobster)

### Non-Profit Roundtable

June 24

8 a.m.-9:30 a.m.

Center for Business Excellence  
49 Commerce Dr., Wyomissing  
\$50/person- GRCA Members;  
\$60/person- Future GRCA Members  
Register at [Greaterreading.org/nonprofit](http://Greaterreading.org/nonprofit)

### Networking @Night: Reading Country Club

June 25

5:30 p.m.-7 p.m.

Reading Country Club  
5311 Perkiomen Ave., Reading  
Free, GRCA Member exclusive  
Register at [Greaterreading.org/RCC](http://Greaterreading.org/RCC)

### Demystifying Economic Development Organizations

June 29

Noon-1 p.m.

Zoom  
Free to all. Participants must pre-register.  
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## REGIONAL CHAMBER ROUNDUP



# MONTGOMERY COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

- 101 Bill Smith Blvd, King of Prussia, PA 19406
- 610-265-1776 • [MontcoChamberPA.org](http://MontcoChamberPA.org)

**ADVOCACY:** At the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, we champion the interest of businesses big and small. We work with lawmakers at every level to create a thriving environment where companies can grow and succeed.

**NETWORKING & CONNECTIONS:** Our events aren't just meetings, they're opportunities to build meaningful connections. Whether you're a Chamber member or just Chamber-curious, join us for a welcoming atmosphere with good food, great conversation, and authentic networking. No hard sells just real people making real connections! Bring your business cards, curiosity and your elevator pitch.

**WHY JOIN THE CHAMBER?:** Advocacy | Connections | Networking | Exposure | Referrals | Member Benefits | Visibility | Weekly E-News | Community Recognition | Learning Opportunities | Access to Local Leaders

## The Power of Connections



Nearly 80 business leaders packed a recent Chamber event, sharing ideas, laughs, and connections that last well beyond the night. The Chamber's programs bring professionals together to collaborate, learn, and strengthen Montgomery County's business community.

### Looking Ahead:

#### Annual Golf Outing - June 8 | 1912 Club

Four-player scramble, championship Par 3 Challenge, prizes including a car and cash, and a post-play celebration

Check out all of our upcoming events and check back often — we're always adding new opportunities at [MontcoChamberPA.org](http://MontcoChamberPA.org).

P.S. Member or not, everyone is welcome; we build a community together!



More info: [MontcoChamberPA.org](http://MontcoChamberPA.org) • 610.265.1776 • [MontgomeryCountyChamber@gmail.com](mailto:MontgomeryCountyChamber@gmail.com)

[www.MontcoChamberPA.org](http://www.MontcoChamberPA.org)



Join us at our next event—your seat's waiting.

Scan the QR code or visit  
<https://members.montcochamberpa.org/events>





18 W. Lightcap Road, Suite 613, Pottstown, PA 19464 | 610.326.2900 | [www.tricountyareachamber.com](http://www.tricountyareachamber.com)

**Our Mission:** Leveraging the power of membership to provide valued membership services and proactive leadership for the tri-county region.

**Our Vision:** The tri-county area has a strong sense of place – quality of life, economic opportunity, and generations of leaders – to support the region's businesses and communities.

Follow us on:      **#WhyTCACC**  
**#tcaccbettertogether**

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

*Congratulations to the businesses listed below for becoming new TCACC Members!*

**AriCares Childcare Center**  
(484) 501-5641

<http://aricareschildcarecenter.com/>  
Day Care Providers - Child

**Rekall Industries**  
(484) 459-7358  
<http://rekallindustries.com/>  
Manufacturers and Processors

**Reliable Car Connection**  
(484) 842-4140  
<http://www.reliablecarconnection.com/>  
Auto Dealers - New / Used

**Stonebridge Funding Partners**  
(610) 960-9169  
<http://www.stonebridgemortgages.com/>  
Real Estate Investment

## MEMBER ANNIVERSARIES

*Happy anniversary to the following Members for their consecutive years of Chamber membership:*

**48+ Years**  
The Body-Borneman Companies  
**30 Years**  
Route 422 Business Advisor  
**10 Years**  
Philadelphia Premium Outlets



**Resources**

**Relationships**

**Recognition**

*Membership opens the door for your business to exchange ideas with other talented leaders in business, community, and government.*

## A REGION SHAPED BY HISTORY

The Tri-County region occupies the point where Chester, Lancaster, and Berks Counties meet, creating a unique blend of landscapes, cultures, and communities. Early European settlers, primarily Welsh immigrants, migrated westward from the "Welsh Tract" into what is now northern Chester and southern Berks in the early 1700s. They were soon joined by German, Irish, and Scottish settlers, who established farms, quarries, and small industries. Waterways like the French and Conestoga Creeks powered wool, paper, grist, and saw mills, while the area's rich natural resources, including iron ore, copper, kaolin, and limestone, supported early industrial growth.

As forests were cleared to produce charcoal for iron furnaces and farmland expanded, the region became a dual powerhouse of agriculture and industry. Large German-owned farms emerged alongside industrial corridors that connected older settled areas with frontier lands. Villages sprang up around these mills, forges, and quarries, forming the backbone of communities that still thrive today.

The arrival of railroads in the 19th century brought further change. Larger population centers emerged, some old industrial operations declined, and suburbanization began to take hold. By the late 20th century, the TriCounty region had transformed into a patchwork of farmland, industry, and resi-

dential development. Lancaster's eastern side retains its rural character, southern Berks continues to embrace agriculture, and northern Chester County shows a vibrant mix of farmland and suburban growth.

Geographically, the region's rolling hills, fertile valleys, and proximity to Philadelphia's markets have long made it ideal for a combination of farming and industry. Culturally, the imprint of Welsh, German, Irish, and Scottish settlers is visible in the architecture, place names, and religious institutions throughout the area. Today, the "Tri-County" identity spans 41 municipalities across northern Chester, southeastern Berks, and western Montgomery Counties, linking communities through history, recreation, and commerce.

As America celebrates 250 years of independence in 2026, the TriCounty region proudly joins in with local projects, exhibits, and events honoring our shared heritage. From preservation efforts to festivals and public art, our communities are embracing this milestone as a chance to reflect on the past and look toward the future. One highlight includes a partnership between the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and the American Battlefield Trust, bringing the American Revolution Experience traveling exhibit to Pottstown. The exhibit features 12 panels, interactive kiosks, and original artwork by Dale Watson, showcasing stories, artifacts, and digital connections to Revolutionary War history—inviting visitors to explore the people and places that shaped our nation.





## REGIONAL CHAMBER ROUNDUP

### You're Invited to the TriCounty Area Chamber's 2026 Golf Outing!

Come support your Chamber and make lasting connections over a round of golf!



**Friday, August 21st**  
**At Twin Ponds Golf Course**

8 AM Registration

9 AM Shotgun Start

1:30 PM Chamber BBQ Lunch by Moyer's Catering

(Lunch only option available for non-golfers)

**Early Bird Prices - through June 1st**

Single Golfer - \$125

Foursome - \$500

**Prices as of June 2nd**

Single Golfer- \$150

Foursome - \$550

Networking BBQ Lunch Only \$40



Join us for a day of golf, camaraderie, and fun!

Non-Golfers are welcome to join the BBQ lunch only.

- 18 holes of golf with cart
- Complimentary refreshments on the course
- Networking BBQ lunch
- Exciting on-course games
- Cash prizes and giveaways

### Contests and Prizes:

#### Team Prizes:

- 1st Place: \$100 per player
- 2nd Place: \$75 per player
- 3rd Place: \$50 per player

#### Individual Contests: \$50 each

- Longest Drive
- Closest to the Pin
- Straightest Drive

### Special Challenges w/ prizes: Hole-In-One & Putting Contest



Scan the QR Code to register for the golf outing, lunch, or a sponsorship opportunity. Call Harrison at 610-326-2900 or email [harrison@tricountyareachamber.com](mailto:harrison@tricountyareachamber.com) for more information on these business exposure opportunities.

## VISIONARY



## STAKEHOLDER



## BUILDING COMMUNITIES



## CREATING CONNECTIONS



## SUPPORTING COMMERCE





# PHOENIXVILLE REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE





## SPRING-FORD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

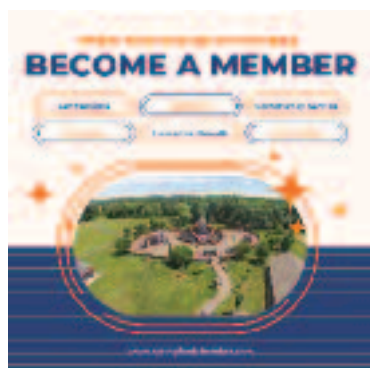
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The Spring-Ford Chamber of Commerce is a community-focused business advocate. We strive to help our member businesses grow while improving the community in which we all live and work.

The Chamber consists of local businesses whose main objective is to run a successful business. We are a great resource for members, not only because we offer the opportunity to network and brainstorm with fellow members, but also to have exposure to the local community, your customer, through our continued involvement in community events and charitable endeavors. Visit [www.springfordchamber.com](http://www.springfordchamber.com) for Chamber Events, Press Releases, Online Newsletters and more!

### Join the Spring-Ford Chamber of Commerce and Become Part of Our Thriving Business Community!



Are you looking to drive economic growth, connect with local businesses, and enhance your community impact? Look no further! The Spring-Ford Chamber is dedicated to supporting and fostering the success of businesses like yours.

**As a member, you'll enjoy:** Networking opportunities with fellow entrepreneurs and professionals • Access to valuable resources and tools for business growth • Participation in exclusive events and workshops • Promotion of your business through our channels *...And much more!*

Visit us online at [www.springfordchamber.com](http://www.springfordchamber.com) to explore the new features and opportunities available to you. Join us in our mission to drive progress and prosperity in our community. Reach out to [sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com](mailto:sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com) for more information on membership benefits and how to join. Let's grow together!

# Limerick Community Day

Join us for a day of fun for the whole family with over 100 vendors, food trucks, and more!

Interested in becoming a sponsor or vendor? Visit us at [www.limerickpa.org](http://www.limerickpa.org) or scan the QR code.

## 15 AUGUST 2026

12:00PM-3:00PM

610-495-6432

LIMERICK COMMUNITY PARK

CONNECT WITH YOUR COMMUNITY!

## BUSINESS CONNECT

The Spring-Ford Chamber of Commerce is committed to driving economic growth, retaining and growing local businesses, and fostering relationships that will continue to enhance the progress and prosperity of our members and the community we serve. We are excited to share upcoming events!

The Spring-Ford Chamber of Commerce is thrilled to continue our thriving Spring-Ford Chamber Business Connect! **This event is held every Tuesday at the Sunshine Café.** Interested in speaking? Reach out to us at [sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com](mailto:sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com)

### Event Logistics:

8:00-8:30am-  
**Networking**

8:30-8:45am-  
**Introductions**

8:45-9:00am-  
**Presentation**

9:00-9:15am-  
**Wrap up**

## PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING

# SAVE THE DATE

Join for a Networking Happy Hour. Meet, Join us for an evening of connection and fun!

**DATE/TIME:**  
THURSDAY, MAY 28, 2025  
5:30PM - 7:00 PM

**LOCATION:**  
PLYMOUTH  
411 BRIDGEPIKE  
LIMERICK, PA 19468

**REGISTRATION: \$30.00**  
COMPLIMENTARY SPRING-FORD BUSINESS CONNECT WITH REGISTRATION

PRE-REGISTRATION REQUIRED AT [www.springfordchamber.com](http://www.springfordchamber.com)

# WIN

## Host a Women in Networking (WIN) Event!

Showcase your business. Build connections, Support women in business The Spring-Ford Chamber invited members to host one of our monthly Women in Networking (WIN) events!

### As a WIN Host, You Will:

- Provide the Venue – Host the event at your business or chosen location
- Offer Light Refreshments – Coffee, pastries, or snacks for guests
- Pay a \$100 Host Fee – This covers Chamber advertising and event promotion across email, social media, and our website
- Enjoy the Spotlight! – You'll have 5-10 minutes to introduce your business and share what you do.

**Why Host a WIN Event?** Gain visibility in the local business community • Reach new potential customers and partners • Support women's professional growth and empowerment • Be featured in Chamber promotions before and after the event

**Interested in Hosting?** Email: [sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com](mailto:sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com)

## WOMEN IN NETWORKING

HOSTED BY:  
MICHELLE GOVAN

Friday, June 5, 2026

8:00 am  
Limerick Township Building  
406 W Ridge Pike

Light refreshments served

PLEASE JOIN US FOR A

# Spring-Ford Chamber Summer Picnic

June 18, 2026

11:30AM-1:00PM

COACH BOB KOCH'S HOUSE

1934 Blum Road, Pottstown, PA 19464

\$20.00 Registration Fee

Pre-Registration is required at [springfordchamber.com](http://springfordchamber.com)

## HOST A SPRING-FORD CHAMBER HAPPY HOUR

Want to spotlight your business and connect with local professionals in a fun, relaxed setting? Now's your chance! The Spring-Ford Chamber is inviting members to host our monthly Networking Happy Hour.

**Why Host?** Showcase your business to Chamber members • Build relationships in a casual, social environment • Gain extra promotion through Chamber emails, social media, and event listing

**Host Investment:** \$150.00 Hosting Fee – covers event promotion, location if not at your business and Chamber staffing.

**Interested in Hosting?** Email: [sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com](mailto:sfchamberofcommerce@gmail.com)  
Claim your preferred month today!



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# THE SBRA COMMUNITY

## Training Our Kidpreneurs



By Gary Seibert, CEO,  
Small Business Resource Association

I know what you're thinking—where did Kidpreneurs come from? I just made it up as I was thinking about what my next article should be. For those of you that follow my monthly 422 Business Advisor articles, you should remember

the article I wrote several months ago about what I learned from a 6-year-old. It was about my introduction into the world of Entrepreneurship and what I learned as a kid. I became a Kidpreneur, at age 6, as I learned 3 very important life lessons:

**#1. Money doesn't grow on trees.**

**#2. If you want something bad enough you will work hard to get it.**

**#3. All the money you make, with all the hard work you do, isn't all yours.**

These 3 lessons have stayed with me for 75 years and helped me in so many ways. Because money doesn't grow on trees, I learned that my wants and needs had two different meanings. "Needs" are generally referred to as a necessity—something you must have, while "wants" typically refers to a desire—something that might make you happier but you really don't really "need" it.

It was my wants that made me angry that money didn't grow on trees but it was my desire that drove me to work hard for the money to satisfy those wants. Sadly enough,

the third lesson, that all the money I earned wasn't mine, still bugs me to this day. But I have learned to just accept that lesson and keep on working, because "money does not grow on trees".

As a Kidpreneur I found out that there were many ways I could earn money, even before I was a teenager. I earned an allowance for making my bed and keeping my room neat, helping with the washing and drying of dishes, mowing the lawn, raking leaves and shoveling snow, washing cars and windows, even walking the dog. I took those skills and went to my neighbors and said if they ever needed help, I was for hire. The neighbors bought into my offer and by the time I was 13, I had my own savings account with well over \$1000 in it and growing.

My grandfather was a carpenter and he taught my dad everything he needed to do to build a house. My dad took those skills and taught them to me telling me that someday they would be well appreciated. Sure enough, in my early adult life as a teacher, I had a small home remodeling company, G.R. Seibert Construction, that I ran in my free time that made me more money than I did teaching high school.

At that point I was transitioning from a Kidpreneur to an Entrepreneur and that has driven my career for the past 60 years. I can't even imagine where I would be today if my

parents had not invested the time in teaching me financial literacy, work ethics, banking, check writing, saving and the value and self-satisfaction of working hard and earning your way in life. Yes, I owe everything I have achieved today to my God Given Abilities and the valuable lessons my parents taught me. Freedom isn't free, neither is lunch. If you want something bad enough, don't put it on a credit card, find a way to make the money so you can pay for it.

As Parents, Grand Parents, Teachers, and even Business Owners we all have the responsibility to teach the younger generation the value and satisfaction of working for what you need as well as what you want. Let's all work together to help our next generation to be self-sufficient by working hard even when there is no one looking, to be self-dependent instead of being dependent and expecting everyone else to fulfill their needs and wants, to understand and appreciate the value of hard work.

Kidpreneurs become Entrepreneurs and our country was founded and built by Entrepreneurs that were hard workers, risk takers and visionaries. We did it once and we can do it again, IF we teach our children the value of money and working for it. It is up to this generation to develop the next generation. Are YOU up to it???







## Rochelle Owens, Exp Realty, LLC

Rochelle Owens is a Realtor, author, and speaker who specializes in helping seniors navigate a stress-free home sale and a smooth transition to senior living. With decades of real estate experience and a compassionate, patient approach, she guides clients and their families through every step of the downsizing and moving process. Rochelle is also the author of *Successful Moves: The Ultimate Guide to a Stress-Free Home Sale and a Smooth Move to Senior Living*.



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## WHAT BUSINESS OWNERS SHOULD REALLY BE THINKING ABOUT



**By Cody Burk,**  
**Vice President,**  
**R&B Insurance Services**

When most business owners think about insurance, the conversation usually starts and ends with health insurance. While providing medical coverage is important, it's only one piece of a much larger

risk management strategy. The reality is that the biggest risks to a business often have little to do with day-to-day operations and everything to do with people. That's where many businesses unintentionally leave gaps.

Many employers assume that offering a health plan is enough. But today's workforce is feeling the strain of out-of-pocket costs, limited networks, and gaps in coverage. This creates two challenges. First, employees may delay care or face financial stress, which has been shown to negatively impact productivity. Second, employers may struggle with retention as competitors offer more comprehensive benefit packages.

The solution to attracting and retaining employees doesn't always mean higher costs. Voluntary benefits like dental, vision, disability, accident, and critical illness coverage can help fill gaps without significantly increasing employer expenses. In many cases, these options provide meaningful protection for employees while improving overall satisfaction. While employee benefits are critical, they're only part of the picture.

Every business has individuals who are critical to its success. Loss of an owner, top producer, or specialized employee would create immediate disruption. Yet many businesses have no formal plan for what happens if that person becomes disabled or passes away.



Key person insurance is designed to address this risk. It provides the business with financial resources to cover lost revenue, recruit and train replacements, or stabilize operations during a difficult transition. Without it, even a profitable business can face serious challenges. That same concept also applies at the ownership level.

For businesses with multiple owners, a buy-sell agreement is essential, but often overlooked or underfunded. A properly structured agreement outlines what happens if an owner exits due to death, disability, or retirement. Just as important is how that transition is funded. Without funding through life and disability insurance, remaining owners may be forced to take on debt, liquidate assets, or bring in outside partners under less-than-ideal circumstances. Ultimately, each consideration points to one thing.

Insurance shouldn't be viewed as a compliance requirement or a once-a-year decision. Instead, it should be part of a broader strategy to protect the business, support employees, and plan for the unexpected.

Business owners who take the time to evaluate employee benefits, key person exposure, and ownership planning are better positioned for long-term stability and growth. In the end, protecting your business means protecting the people who make it run.

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*Members Helping Each Other Grow*



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# SCALING CHAOS



By Lana Potgieter,  
**Lighthouse  
Leadership Coaching  
& Development**

AI is supposed to give us time. And help us grow our businesses. I receive pitches daily from people who will

help me “add \$50 000 per month in revenues!” or get me 30 new appointments per week. I’m sure you do too. Do you get as annoyed as I do? They don’t know what I’m starting from, nor do they know what my business capacity is for new business.

There is a general push for all businesses not only to grow but to scale or 10X. More customers, more staff, more locations, and bigger revenue can feel like proof that the business is succeeding. And yes, we should be aiming for growth. Here’s where I might sound contrarian: scaling a business and sustaining a business are not the same thing. *Often, all that’s happened is they’ve scaled chaos.*

## Growth exposes weaknesses. It does not hide them.

One of the biggest mistakes leaders make when scaling is growing before the business is operationally ready. Revenue increases faster than systems, communication, and leadership capability. What

looked manageable with five people suddenly becomes chaotic with fifteen. The founder, who once knew everything happening in the business, becomes the bottleneck for every decision. And as uncertainty grows in the leader, so does frustration within the team.

## Delegation is not losing control; it is creating capacity.

Many business owners built the company through hard work, sacrifice, and personal involvement in every detail. That mindset helps start a business, but it often limits growth. When owners continue making every decision, approving every process, and solving every problem, the business cannot scale beyond their personal capacity.

Unfortunately, many leaders delegate tasks without delegating responsibility, authority, or clarity. Employees are expected to “take ownership” without understanding expectations, priorities, or outcomes. This creates frustration on both sides and slows execution dramatically.

Delegating in order to scale is not the same as giving tasks or instructions; it is about sharing responsibility and making room for others to share their perspectives.

Of course, hearing others’ perspectives requires improved skills in active listening, persuasion, and influence.

**BE BETTER. GROW FASTER.**

See How SBRA Member

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### Scaling requires intentional team design, not reactive staffing.

Hiring too quickly — or too slowly — is another scaling challenge. Some businesses panic-hire when workloads increase, bringing in people without proper cultural alignment or role clarity. Others delay hiring because they fear the cost, resulting in burnout among existing staff and declining customer experience.

### Profit is never equal to cash flow.

Cash flow management is another silent threat. Ironically, growth itself can create financial pressure. Larger orders, increased payroll, additional stock, and longer customer payment cycles can place enormous strain on cash reserves. Many profitable businesses fail because they run out of cash while growing.

Leaders must understand the difference between profit and cash flow. Growth consumes resources before it produces stability.

Not every opportunity is strategic. Just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

A further mistake is losing strategic focus. Small businesses often succeed because they are agile and customer-focused. As they grow, opportunities appear everywhere. New products, new markets, partnerships, and side projects

can become distractions that dilute energy and confuse teams.

Scaling businesses need greater clarity, not greater complexity. The more a business grows, the more important simplicity becomes. Clear priorities, defined processes, strong communication, and aligned leadership become essential.

That transition is uncomfortable and emotionally and mentally taxing.

Finally, many leaders underestimate the emotional transition required when scaling. The skills needed to build a small business are not always the same skills needed to lead a larger organization. Founders must shift from being the primary doer to becoming the architect of culture, systems, accountability, and vision.

Sustainable scaling is not about growing as fast as possible. It is about building a business strong enough to carry the weight of its own success. "Dig the well before you are thirsty." Scale with intention, not with hurry.

*Lana Potgieter is the founder of Lighthouse Leadership Coaching & Development, partnering with business owners and leadership teams to cut through complexity, strengthen strategic thinking, and create sustainable growth through clarity, accountability, and aligned leadership. To connect with Lana or book a complimentary Leadership Clarity Conversation, visit [www.lighthouseleadership.coaching](http://www.lighthouseleadership.coaching) or call 484.347.0515.*

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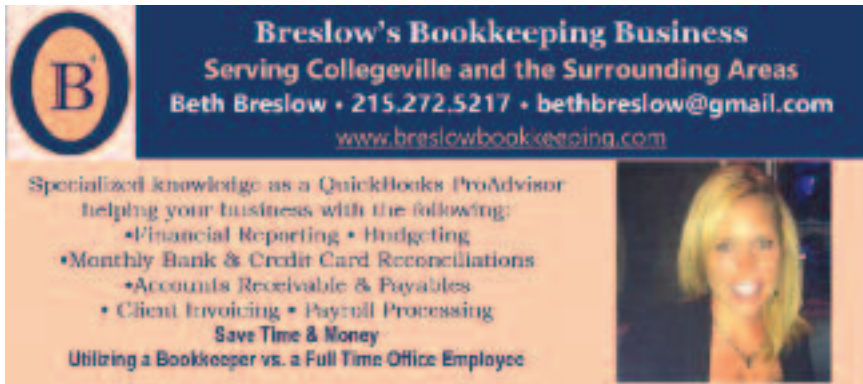
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# IS IT TIME TO REVISIT THE RIGHT-TO-KNOW ACT?

**LEGAL PERSPECTIVES**



By **Charles D. Garner, Jr., Esquire, Wolf, Baldwin & Associates, P.C.**

It's hard to believe that in a few short years the new "Right-to-Know Act" will be twenty years old. The law was enacted in early 2008, with an effective date of January 2009. At the time the law provided a major overhaul to the prior law since the new "Act" made a broad presumption that any record of an agency was a public record and generally shifted the burden to the agency to show that the records were not subject to disclosure either through some statute or one of the enumerated exceptions in the new law. However, as with most legislation, the law typically does not keep up with technology and its advances, as well as changes in our society.

It is fair to assume that when the new "Act" was being drafted in the years prior to 2008, most of the records were likely in paper form which would include letters, minutes, ordinances, agreements and similar writings when the use of paper was prevalent. Fortunately, even nearly twenty years ago, the state legislature had the foresight to define a record as follows:

"Information regardless of its physical form or characteristics, that documents a transaction or activity of an agency and that is created, received or retained pursuant to law or in connection with a transaction, business or activity of the agency..."



Thus, records were considered records regardless of their physical form. Obviously, today many records are archived in some type of electronic format which was not likely to have existed twenty years ago. No one could have envisioned the continued evolution of technology so that records such as emails, texts, social media postings, video footage, audio recordings, and other such non-paper records would be so commonplace and typically be requested as part of a public records request.

The implementation of the Right-to-Know law in 2009 did place an additional burden on all municipalities since it required the appointment of a Right-to-Know Officer and created a rather extensive appeal process through the State Open Records Office.

*(Continued on page 42)*

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## LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

(Continued from page 41)

Although not technically an unfunded mandate, it certainly has had an impact on all municipalities, particularly those who have smaller budgets or which do not have technology available to them like larger and more wealthy municipalities.

Today, many of the decisions that have been handed down by the State Open Records Office and the county and appellate courts deal with text messages, emails, and social media postings of elected and appointed officials. Requiring the archiving and maintenance of these types of records is quite different than what might have been required when records were more typically in paper form years ago. Accordingly, it might be appropriate for the legislature to consider comprehensive amendments to the "Act" to attempt to codify or incorporate some of the Court decisions that have already been rendered to test whether the Court has properly interpreted the intent of the "Act".

In addition, twenty years ago it was not uncommon for many municipalities to provide documents and agenda materials to elected officials in paper form. Over the years, however, more and more municipalities have been providing iPads, laptops and other devices to elected officials for their use which has caused an increase in the number

of potential records which are created through texts and emails. Wealthier municipalities have had the ability to hire IT firms and obtain software to better retain, review, and provide these types of public records requests, while the smaller less wealthy municipalities have had to employ other methods to comply with the state law.

While the current law still functions appropriately, it would seem that given the change in technology and the use of social media, it would be appropriate for the committees of the state legislature to begin a thorough and comprehensive review of the existing Right-to-Know law, and attempt to implement changes that would retain the existing spirit of the law but aid municipalities in an attempt to reduce their costs in providing public documents and records when receiving a Right-to-Know request.

*Charles D. Garner, Jr., Esquire, is an attorney at the law firm of Wolf, Baldwin & Associates, P.C., which maintains offices in Pottstown, Pennsburg, Reading, and West Chester. He has significant experience in municipal representation, zoning and land use matters. In addition to serving as solicitor for various municipalities, Mr. Garner was also a former elected supervisor for the Township of New Hanover. He and the firm have other diverse experience including small business representation, municipal employment negotiation and litigation, contracts and civil litigation, and estate planning and administration. Mr. Garner can be reached at 610.323.7436 or by email to [cgarner@wolfbaldwin.com](mailto:cgarner@wolfbaldwin.com).*

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# FARMLAND PRIME FOR DATA CENTERS, BUT AT WHAT COST?

By Lauren Jessop,  
The Center Square Contributor

Data center developers are increasingly targeting agricultural land for new projects, and residents in affected communities are mounting opposition, concerned about the industrialization of their farmland.

At the same time, Gov. Josh Shapiro's administration is pursuing two priorities that can be difficult to balance: attracting data center investment while preserving Pennsylvania farmland. This creates a push-pull between the economic promise of data centers and concerns about farmland loss, local resource demands, and long-term community stability.

The question is whether both objectives can be met without compromising the agriculture industry or the rural character of the communities being asked to host these projects.

During Shapiro's budget address in February, he announced GRID – the Governor's Responsible Infrastructure Development standards – a policy framework that sets strict standards for large-scale infrastructure projects like data centers.

He stated, "If companies adhere to these principles, they will unlock benefits from the Commonwealth, including speed and certainty in permitting and available tax credits."

The standards are intended to reassure communities that economic development will not come at the expense of local resources – a concern especially acute in a state where agriculture contributes billions to the state's economy.

Pennsylvania leads the nation in preserved farms, Shannon Powers, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, told The Center Square.

Since voters approved the state's Farmland Preservation Program in 1988, Powers said, Pennsylvania has protected 6,704 farms and 665,585 acres in 58 counties from future development, investing more than \$1.84 billion in state, county, and local funds.

She noted the administration has continued that commitment, investing nearly \$164 million to preserve 555 farms and 46,178 prime acres of farmland across the state – and that Pennsylvania agriculture supports over 48,800 farms, nearly 600,000 jobs, and contributes \$132.5 billion annually to the state's economy.

Powers said Shapiro recognizes agriculture as both part of Pennsylvania's heritage and essential to its economic future, naming it one of five key industries in his 10-year economic development strategy – the first of its kind in over two decades.

"Over the years, the Shapiro Administration has made meaningful investments to help support business expansion and transition planning, soil and water conservation, and strengthening the workforce and infrastructure on those farms and in the food processing and other businesses that rely on, and in turn, support those farms."

Those investments underscore the importance of preserving agriculture's long-term viability as new economic pressures create competition for the same resources farms depend on.

The American Farm Bureau Federation says this current trend creates a dual reality of opportunity and risk – agriculture depends on data centers for innovation and efficiency, and data centers increasingly compete with agriculture for access to land, water, and energy.

(Continued on page 44)

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## FARMLAND PRIME FOR DATA CENTERS

(Continued from page 43)

Farmland is often cleared, flat, and available in large parcels, making it attractive to developers seeking sites near power grids, fiber routes, and favorable tax or regulatory environments. As more agricultural land is considered for rezoning, even unconverted farmland can gain speculative development value, raising land prices and rental costs for farmers.

The concern is that once farmland is converted to industrial use, it is rarely returned to production. In high-demand areas, data center development can drive land prices sharply higher, and tools like the use of Section 1031 of the tax code may further spread those price pressures as sellers reinvest proceeds into farmland elsewhere.

There are currently no comprehensive state regulations specific to data centers, and while communities like Lower Mount Bethel Township organize to keep hundreds of acres of farmland from being industrially zoned, local and state lawmakers are actively debating legislation to put guardrails in place.

Sen. Katie Muth, D-Royersford, has proposed legislation that would

impose a statewide three-year moratorium on hyperscale data center development.

In Muth's co-sponsorship memo, she said Pennsylvania cannot afford to repeat past mistakes of approving large-scale industrial development first and confronting the consequences later.

A moratorium would be a necessary step in protecting public health, safety, fiscal stability, and environmental integrity while ensuring decisions are informed, coordinated, and equitable, she said.

"In his budget address, the Governor said that we can play a leading role in winning the battle for AI supremacy—but we have to do it in a way that puts the good people of Pennsylvania first," Muth said. "If state government officials truly want to put the people of Pennsylvania first, they will enact this moratorium to allow local governments a chance to protect their residents. The moratorium will also allow state regulators to use this thoughtful pause as an opportunity to update policies and regulations to protect our Commonwealth."



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My mom says I started writing around age four, with all of my chubby little fingers gripping whatever crayon or pencil I could find.

I still write that way, with all five fingers firmly gripping the pen (my favorite is the Pilot G-2, .38, in black). Unless I'm brainstorming story ideas with people, in which case, I've been known to throw my pen across the room in excitement. Sure, I talk with my hands — I can thank my Italian grandmother for that — but the flying pen is really about my love of writing projects, whatever the size or scope. It could be a video-based editorial board meeting for a top healthcare client or a kitchen table chat with one of my nieces who loves to write. I bring the same enthusiasm for new ideas and a deep love

of the written word to every project and planning session.

I also consider myself a word engineer, developing meaningful, efficient, and creative language solutions for diverse specifications. From professional emails to personal memoirs and anything in between, I love helping people discover the perfect words for the job and the best platform for delivering that carefully crafted message.

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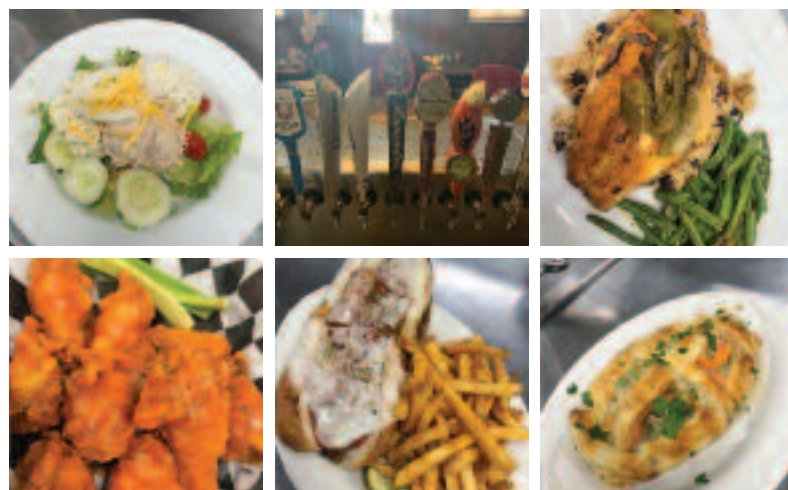
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## Ye Old Coventry Pub

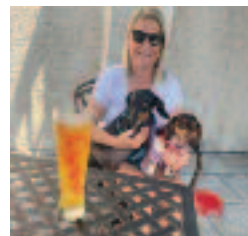
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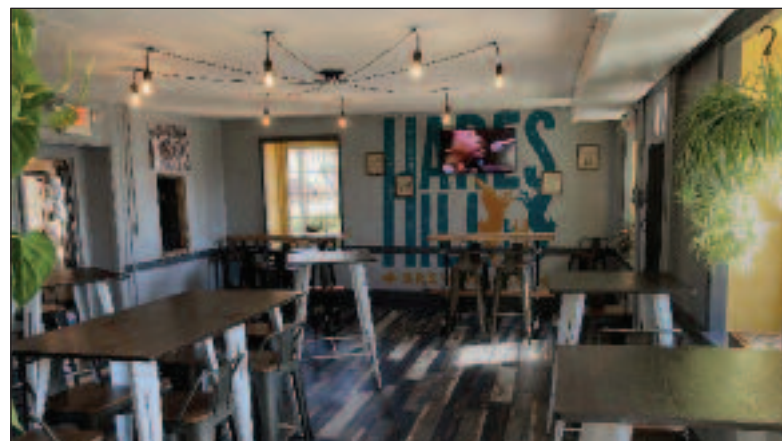
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*The green dome and neoclassical columns of the Pennsylvania State Capitol, where Gov. Josh Shapiro and lawmakers from both parties will be working on a state budget during the next seven weeks.*

# DEFICIT OF \$5.7 BILLION PROMPTS PREDICTION OF 'CRISIS' IN PENNSYLVANIA



**By Ford Turner,  
The Center Square**

Pennsylvania government has a \$5.7 billion problem, and close observers of those running the state don't anticipate seeing a full solution 46 days when the 2026-27 budget deadline arrives this month.

The latest projection from the state Independent Fiscal Office is for a budget deficit of

\$5.7 billion next fiscal year. There has been no public indication by Gov. Josh Shapiro or any of the 253 lawmakers of any agreement yet to significantly reduce it. The budget deadline is June 30.

Last year, politically divided leaders went 135 days past the deadline before adopting a budget, triggering billions of dollars in missed payments, furloughs, and program cutbacks across the state. The top Republican on the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Jim Struzzi of Indiana County, thinks a "lesson was learned" and things will be different this year.

"I believe the energy is a little different this time," Struzzi said. His own belief, he

said, is that "we cannot burden taxpayers with this continuing deficit, year after year.

But Marc Stier, former executive director of the Pennsylvania Policy Center, said the enormity of the deficit means "we are going to have a crisis, one way or the other." Stier believes that during the upcoming budget negotiations "we are going to see a lot of hot air and another evasion of the fiscal problem we face."

Elizabeth Stelle, vice president of policy analysis for the Commonwealth Foundation, said continuing inaction on major money issues — like the potential regulation of skill games, the possible legalization of adult-use marijuana, and a tax system change known as "combined reporting" — indicates "we are not close to a serious budget moving forward."

The governor and most lawmakers are up for election this year, a fact that some believe will prompt a quick — if not responsible — budget deal.

In February, the Democratic governor proposed a budget for 2026-27 with spending of \$53.3 billion, with the structural budget deficit to be masked by a withdrawal of \$4.6 billion in one-time money from the

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state's so-called "Rainy Day Fund." That fund, as of this week, contained \$7.7 billion.

Both chambers of the state Legislature — the Democratic-controlled House and the Republican-controlled Senate — must approve budget bills.

By Friday, the only approval of a major budget-related initiative came with mid-April House passage of an appropriations bill that mirrored Shapiro's budget proposal.

Republican leaders in the Senate said they had "profound concerns" about the spending in that bill.

Since then, though, their chamber has not passed any major appropriations bill.

In fact, the Senate had only three scheduled voting session days in Harrisburg last month, May 4, 5, and 6. The May 5 session ended around 8:45 a.m., after which senators made the roughly two-hour trip from Harrisburg to downtown Philadelphia.

The visit was for a "ceremonial meeting" — with no votes — celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Senators had a group picture taken with Independence Hall in the background.

Sen. Jay Costa of Allegheny County, the top Democrat in the Senate, said the three-day string of session days this month was wasted in "shameful" fashion with a heavy emphasis on "culture war bills" that will not reduce costs for Pennsylvanians. The squandering of time, he said, came as "Pennsylvanians are paying skyrocketing utility bills, dropping healthcare coverage,

and struggling to put food on their tables."

Senate Majority Leader Joe Pittman of Indiana County said Costa "is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts. And the facts demonstrate otherwise."

Both parties are responsible for the massive budget deficit, according to Stier. Both, he said, have continued to endorse a tax system that favors lower taxes on corporations and goes easy on the wealthy. It is, he said, the "biggest cause of our stressful deficit."

Stelle said her organization believes the cost of the Shapiro-proposed set of appropriations for 2026-27, coupled with the existing deficit, points to tax increases of \$2,100 per household in Pennsylvania. This budget year, she said, the foundation would like to see an agreement to dial back the size of any spending increase in order to reduce the deficit.

Republican state Rep. Jeremy Shaffer of Allegheny County thinks the problem is larger than that. He backs bills to reduce the size of the Legislature, impose term limits, and suspend legislative pay raises during a budget impasse.

Shaffer sees two possible scenarios in the next few months.

In one, top leaders of both parties agree to a fairly quick budget deal that will "kick the can down the road" by drawing billions out of the Rainy Day Fund. In the other, there is an actual effort to resolve the major deficit issue.

In the latter case, he said, "It is going to take a long time."

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## ANOTHER ROAD TRIP



### DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

On May 15, I will begin my annual economic development survey of

70 cities. This is the fourth year, and I plan to make one more trip in 2027. I first took the trip in May 2021, when the Lockdown was winding down.

I classified every storefront using the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), a standard framework used by federal agencies to classify business establishments for collecting, analyzing, and publishing statistical data on the U.S. economy. I averaged two or three cities per day. In places like the Bay Area, I could get four in a day because it is compact.

Last year, the total number of properties surveyed was 5,436, of which 4,175 were occupied, and 1,261 were vacant. The combined overall vacancy rate across all downtown/street-access locations is approximately 23.2 percent. This is significantly higher than the current national retail vacancy rate (around 4.3–4.4 percent for all retail properties)

In the first year, I counted the vacancies. I did not go out in 2022 because the recovery lagged, and I thought I would give it a chance to get up and running before I did the final four years of the longitudinal study. The next year, I did the store mix with vacancies. By the time I got to Seattle, I saw the US Bank Building closed, and entire streets were lined with vacant storefronts. The city was shrinking. And then I thought to myself, they aren't going to come back soon, and it is almost like piling on with that kind of vacancy count.

In 2024, I defined target areas, which are the boundaries I believed marked the start and end of the commercial area. Last year, I compiled all the addresses and uses, which will make it much easier for me to complete the inventory this year. I speak with merchants and gather a little info here and there, but for the most part, the numbers don't lie.

I documented conditions during the lockdown. It was pretty grim in Milwaukee; there was no one on the street. I mean, no one. I hooked up with a homeless person there, and we shot the breeze for a while. Then someone came out and took pictures of me taking pictures. I just kept talking to the guy and ignored it. In a way, it is better to do what you do and not do something just because they did something.

As an old man walking around with a \$2000 camera by myself, you have to just go with it because you have a purpose: to observe, not participate. Not that I have not sampled some very good restaurants and stayed in some nice hotels, but for the most part I am invisible.

I am focusing my efforts on Portland. I really like Portland. I started collecting addresses and business names a year earlier than the rest. In 2021, everything was boarded, and there was a lot of protest art on the boards. By the time I went back in 2023, the boards had vanished, but there were still many vacancies. Many jewelry stores were set on fire, and last year most of those buildings were rehabilitated. It still has a pretty high vacancy rate, but they are making honest progress and coming back. I remember the official vacancy rate was announced at four percent in a news article. I knew that was neither correct nor close.

*(Continued on page 52)*

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## DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

(Continued from page 50)

Traveling between cities can be a pleasant experience or a very trying one. I like to put it on cruise control and listen to some of the great courses I have downloaded to my phone. There is a stretch between Memphis, TN, and Sulphur Springs, TX, that has too many trucks on the road, and that part of the drive is difficult. Driving along the Texas border is very easy, with few cars on the road, and it features periodic sections of a four-lane highway. Much of that area has no cell phone service. I also noticed that Bluetooth would disconnect periodically.

The list of cities has been somewhat dynamic, and I have dropped cities like Salton Sea, CA, and Gary, ID, because they are not representative of anything beyond themselves. Gary has three open commercial entities and a 92 percent vacancy rate. Salton Sea was as contaminated as ever.

I am monitoring two redevelopment projects: one in Indio, CA, and another in the Austin, TX, Capitol area. Both are making progress, and the landscape is changing quickly. In Memphis, Minneapolis, Louisville, Austin, and a couple of areas in San Francisco, I surveyed the entertainment districts. In some cases, I covered the entire downtown because it was well-defined and not shrinking in terms of viable streets, as in Seattle, and it takes about two or three hours to cover a town.

Once I get my inventory, I will analyze it and determine whether factors such as Interest Rates / Monetary Policy strongly affect borrowing costs for businesses, developers, and landlords, resulting in higher rates and less expansion, which in turn leads to more closures and slower leasing.

Consumer Spending / Retail Sales Growth directly drives retail and hospital-

ity vacancies. I will track the year-over-year percentage change in real personal consumption expenditures or retail trade sales. Check on E-commerce Growth / Online Retail Penetration, measured as the percentage of total retail sales online or as year-over-year growth in e-commerce. It hits brick-and-mortar retail hard (especially non-essential NAICS codes).

Tourism/Visitor Numbers, hotel occupancy, airport passengers, or convention attendance are critical for hospitality and for downtown retail and restaurants. Small and large cities differ sharply here. Foot traffic is also affected by Remote/Hybrid Work Adoption Rate, which complements the office occupancy factor, determining the percentage of workers in hybrid/remote roles.

High construction costs for a new supply pipeline (or building permits for commercial space) slow new development which can keep vacancy lower long-term, but legacy oversupply hurts. Also, Minimum Wage Increases or Labor Costs hit hospitality and retail margins hard, especially in downtown areas with high labor demand.

Crime Rates or Public Safety Perception affect foot traffic, business decisions, and resident migration — often linked to homelessness. The Unemployment Rate is a classic predictor — higher unemployment reduces foot traffic and tenant demand.

Finally, the dreaded Zoning / Land-Use Regulation Changes can create structural oversupply even if demand falls.

I will spend the next year putting together the mathematics and have my model up and running before I go out next year.

*Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at [barrycassidy@comcast.net](mailto:barrycassidy@comcast.net).*

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