

The Business Journal

of Tri-Cities Tennessee / Virginia bjournal.com

With every challenge comes new opportunity

The silver linings of our region's
COVID-19 response

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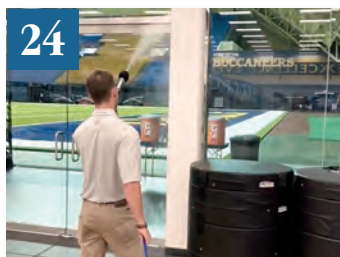




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To nominate an individual or organization today, email news@bjournal.com or mail to P.O. Box 5006, Johnson City, TN 37602 with a letter of recommendation telling what makes them a Healthcare Hero. Deadline for nominations is the close of business on May 31.

In addition to recognizing general Healthcare Heroes, five special Cup of Kindness® Awards will be presented from the following categories:

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To an individual or organization for excellence in public health.

Distinguished Service Award

To a provider who has shown leadership and excellent service over a sustained period of time.

Meritorious Service Award

To an individual who has shown excellence in administration.

Support Service Award

To a provider for outstanding assistance in the field of health care.

The 2020 Healthcare Heroes Luncheon will be held Friday, August 28 at the Carnegie Hotel in Johnson City.

Force majeure and more



Force majeure is a legal term describing an event so unexpected and disruptive that it may serve to excuse a party from honoring a contract. We're seeing it employed today by businesses that have no way of meeting their contractual obligations to vendors, landlords and employees. But the crisis brought on by the arrival of the novel Coronavirus first identified in 2019 (hence the name COVID-19) goes beyond even that definition.

Welcome to force majeure maxima. The contracts being voided today go far beyond landlord-tenant arrangements. They include some of the most basic social and political contracts understood in modern American society (to say nothing of the world).

Remember those light, playful days when President Trump referred to Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Bernie Sanders as "Crazy Bernie" because Sanders was a self-admitted socialist? Well, on March 19, President Trump was asked if he supported the United States government taking equity stakes in companies that accept federal stimulus dollars.

"I do," the president said. "I really do."

Just to be clear, the definition of socialism is an economic and social system advocating for the vesting of ownership and control of the means of production and distribution of capital, land and other assets by the government.

And yet almost nobody said, "Crazy Donald." The acceptance of previously unthinkable economic steps sums up our understanding of the risk we face.

Lifelong fiscal conservatives, to paraphrase Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, "gagged and voted for" a \$2 trillion stimulus/bailout package, to be paid for with money we don't have. Why? The two likeliest alternatives are A) a worldwide economic depression with the United States leading the plunge or B) a too-soon reopening of the economy that rekindles the spread of the biological threat that started the whole thing.

Ronald Reagan once said the scariest words in the English language were, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you." Faced with a crisis of this magnitude, however, individuals and businesses alike demand that help. When you look at all of this through a non-COVID-adjusted lens, it seems inconceivable at first glance that American capitalists would stand for such.

Yet this is not even the first time in most of our lifetimes we have lived through a force majeure maxima. Those who remember the horror of Sept. 11, 2001 also remember that we as a nation were willing to respond to that day's events by plunging a government that had been operating with balanced budgets deeply into the red. We also willingly accepted changes to American culture because of the 9/11 attacks. The idea that government cameras with facial recognition software would be commonplace would have been abhorrent to us before 9/11. Just so, the notion that we'd need to take off items of clothing and be patted down like petty criminals in order to board a plane would have seemed absurd. Yet the cameras and the body searches are part of everyday life today. And far fewer Americans died on 9/11, than will eventually succumb to COVID-19.

So, we are left to wonder which of the changes we see today will linger beyond the virus. How long will the government need to prop up businesses large and small? Will the government consider taking equity stakes in companies that contract to manufacture items of critical national interest that are currently manufactured overseas, including drugs and medical devices? What will be done for Americans whose retirements tanked with the markets in March? Or will we trust to the market for that?

And what additional changes will we see? How much of the American small business base will be in debt to the government when the crisis ends, having been forced to accept government loans just to keep the doors open this summer? Will Zoom continue to cannibalize Delta's market share? Will streaming replace movie theatres?

One of the few certainties we face is that the challenges of today will create opportunities tomorrow. Gaps in the market are already appearing and being filled. Businesspeople who are observant, opportunistic and not averse to risk will have the greatest chance to come out on the other side with greater prosperity.

As we said in our weekly eJournal product last month, all of us at *The Business Journal* and our sister publication, *The Johnson City News & Neighbor* wish you the best of health, physically and economically, and we look forward to once again shaking your hand when this crisis passes.



Eastman Leaders' Breakfast

On March 4, Eastman convened its annual Regional Leaders' Breakfast at the MeadowView Conference, Resort and Convention Center. Eastman CEO Mark Costa detailed the company's strong cash position, as well as its overall plan to deal with the spread of COVID-19. The event marked the last large-scale meeting in the region in which business leaders, many of whom had recently traveled outside the region, would be in close physical proximity.



PHOTOS BY EARL NEIKIRK



Pending home sales cancellation rate may increase

There were about 1000 approved contracts for residential resales awaiting approval at the end of February, according to the Northeast Tennessee Association of Realtors' (NETAR) latest report. Those contracts were in the pipeline before Coronavirus took over the 24-7 news cycle.

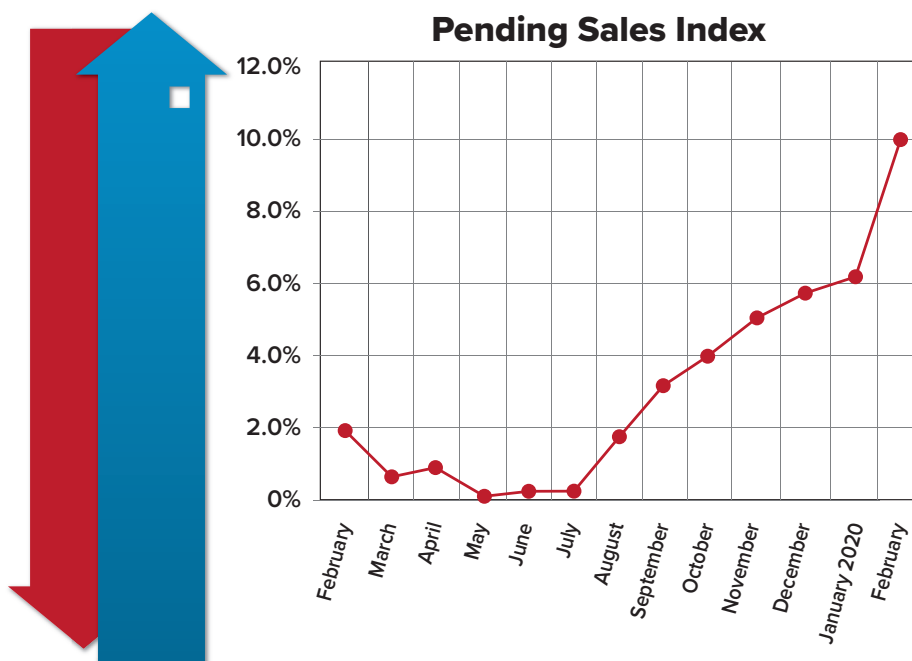
Pending sales are a leading indicator of housing activity based on signed contracts for existing single-family homes, condominium, and townhome resales in the area monitored by NETAR's Trends Report. Since resales go under contract 30 to 60 days before the sale is closed, pending sales typically lead existing-home sales by about two months. The local fall-through/cancellation rate has been as high as 10 percent due to contracts with contingencies. That will likely increase as buyers become more concerned about Coronavirus and the economy. NETAR's March home sales report will be released shortly after April 10.

The unprecedented measures under-

way to combat the spread of COVID-19 and the resulting concerns about the decline in the direction of the economy will affect the local housing market. "How much remains to be seen," said NETAR President Kristi Bailey. The local housing market has been resilient during past downturns, she added.

Current conditions will likely follow what's happening on the national level, said Don Fenley, NETAR's data analyst.

Active listings at the end of February were down 33 percent from a year ago, and the region had 3.4 months of inventory. A similar situation exists on the national level. "With fewer listings, home prices are likely to hold steady," according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR) Chief Economist Lawrence Yun. "The temporary softening of the real estate market will likely be followed by a strong rebound once the economic quarantine is lifted, and it's critical that the supply is sufficient to meet pent-up demand," he said.



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Bill Hemphill, associate professor in ETSU's College of Business and Technology, examines a completed faceshield.

PHOTO COURTESY ETSU



Region unifies in fight to save economy

Public, private, social sectors find common ground across geographic borders

by Scott Robertson

If a crisis had to hit this region, thank God it chose now to do so. Less than two years ago, the concept of regional cooperation was pretty much just that, a concept. Little was being done in the way of implementation. Today, however, entities across city, county and state lines are coming together, forging new alliances to fight a common enemy.

The region's response to the coronavirus pandemic (and the economic effects of the fight to contain it) would inspire

those who long ago built Tri-Cities Airport, who proposed a regional performing arts center near that airport, who built the Tri-County Industrial Park, and who have fostered regional economic developments through the years.

Said one community leader who requested her name not be used with this quote, "all it took was us all getting kicked in the (expletive deleted) real hard at the same time." In the pages that follow, we'll share some of this good news.

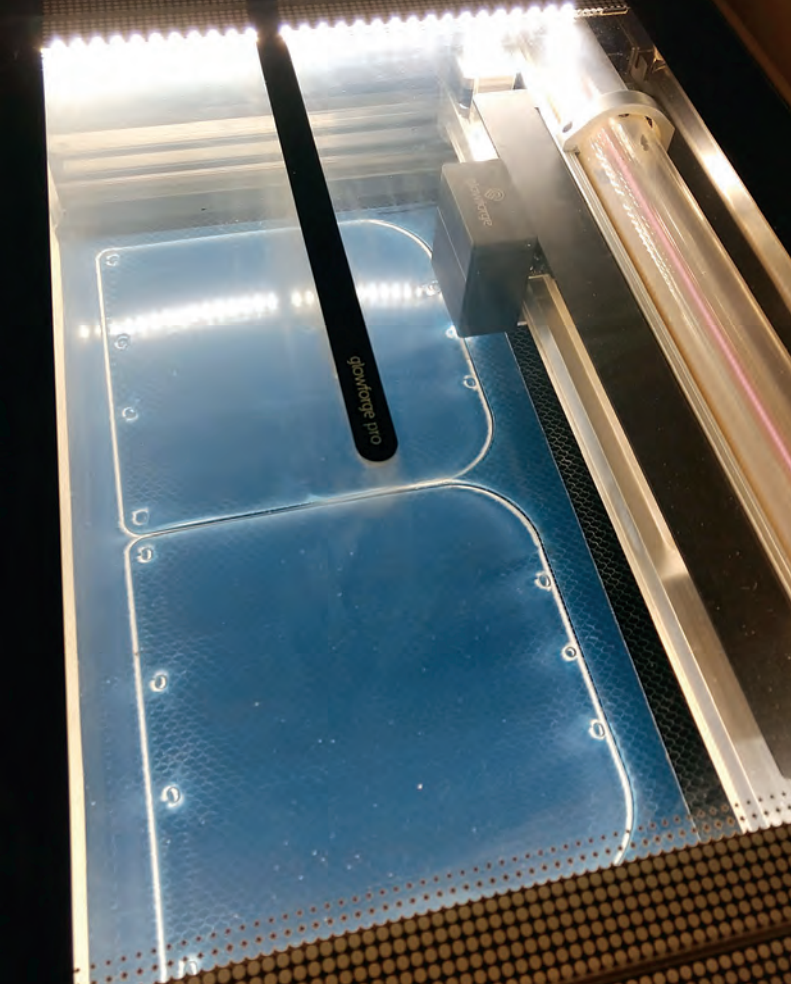
Northeast State, ETSU, Eastman and STREAMWORKS collaborate on faceshields

In a laboratory at Northeast State's Regional Center of Advanced Manufacturing (RCAM) Academy in Kingsport, the whirring sound of 3D printing machines turned out detailed products. Not much different from a regular lab day. Except the machines were not being used for instruction, but the manufacturing of headgear for face shields used by health care workers on the front lines of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Northeast State instructor Keith Bowery kept watch as the printers formed the headgear using a filament the RCAM Academy regularly uses in teaching applications.

"They are made from a polymer material we use in several applications," said Bowery, an instructor of CAD and 3D printing as well as curriculum designer at RCAM. "We use the material to print and replace parts on our own equipment."

The RCAM uses 10 3D printers as teaching tools for student doing laboratory hours. The demand to repurpose the printers



A 3D printer at work on headgear at RCAM.
PHOTO COURTESY NORTHEAST STATE



Northeast State instructor Keith Bowery shows off the headgear printed by a 3D printer at RCAM. PHOTO COURTESY NORTHEAST STATE

into manufacturing tools for health care workers happened as the Coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak left the health care industry scrambling for personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers. The RCAM labs were freed up this week as the college moved instruction online through the remainder of the spring semester.

The Academy partnered with STREAMWORKS Education in Kingsport to send five 3D printers to manufacture headgear at the STREAMWORKS STEM Gym. This collaborative effort formed after Governor Bill Lee tasked state institutions to find new ways to serve Tennesseans during the COVID-19 crisis. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), in concert with the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and respective universities, located 3D printers to produce face shields using 3D printers which were already available at campuses.

"We started using the RCAM printers at STREAMWORKS on Sunday," said Heath McMillian, executive director of Economic and Workforce Development at Northeast State. "We fired up the five printers here at the Academy on Monday morning."

THEC announced last week that public postsecondary institutions across the state would utilize existing 3D printers to augment the medical supply for Tennesseans. Northeast State joined the project along with fellow TBR institutions including Tennessee Center for Applied Technology (TCAT) at Elizabethton; TCAT Shelbyville; TCAT Murfreesboro; and TCAT Jackson. Four-year institutions producing face shields include Austin Peay State University; East Tennessee State University; Tennessee

Technological University; University of Memphis; and University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

"In unprecedented times, Tennessee higher education is united in doing our part to support the state's brave health care professionals," THEC Executive Director Mike Krause said. "Our colleges and universities have always been incubators for innovation, and this is a perfect example of the ingenuity and dedication of that work."

After three days of intensive, around the clock efforts that included a range of community and business partners, the effort produced over 1,500 critically needed pieces of PPE for health care professionals.

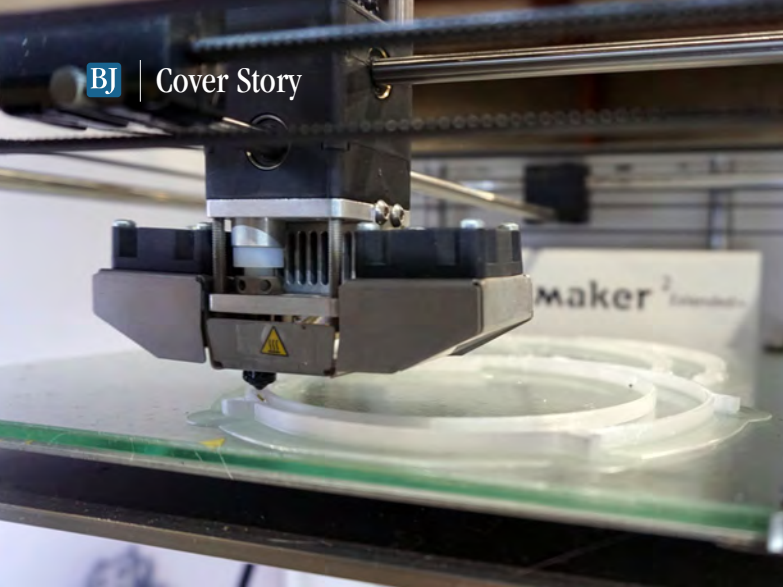
Bowery took his work home with him. He started printing headgear on his personal 3-D printer. A practice he plans to continue as needs be.

"I can keep them printing at night and on the weekends," he said.

Dennis Courtney, executive director of STREAMWORKS Education, got the call on a Saturday to convert his STEM Gym teaching laboratory into a medical supply manufacturer. Once the RCAM printers were set up, the headgear and shields manufacturing went live. Within hours, RCAM and STREAMWORKS Education converted their educational environments into medical manufacturing facilities.

"Two weeks ago, I never would have envisioned we would be making medical face shields," said Courtney. "But here we are producing 24 hours a day trying to get as many out there as we can."

SEE **REGION, 12**



3D printer at work. PHOTO COURTESY NORTHEAST STATE

REGION, CONTINUED

Courtney ferried approximately 70 face shields to Knoxville on Tuesday for transport to health care workers in Nashville. The central packaging of the PPE delivered on a following Tuesday happened at Austin Peay State University, the campus that originated the prototype. After completion, the PPE was delivered directly to the Tennessee Department of Health.

At RCAM and the STEM Gym, the 3D printers continue crafting headgear. A 3D laser printer details and produces the face shields designed to attach to the headgear pieces. The screen material used in the manufacture of the headgear and shields manufactured at RCAM and STEM Gym can be sterilized and reused.

"If you have the capability or you can adapt and be flexible with the capabilities you have, then why wouldn't you?" asked Courtney. "We've found a way you could manufacture these masks and we could turn a STEM education facility into modified medical products manufacturing facility."

Dobyns-Bennett EXCEL student Quintin Folkner manned the laser printer programmed via computer software to cut notches into the face shields. The laser printer cut out notches in the screen material to connect the headgear and splash guard into a functioning face shield.

"I'm studying technology applications especially underwater robotics, which got me very interested in it," said Folkner, who will be attending Northeast State this fall.

McMillian and Courtney said the production targets now shifted to producing shields and possibly other personal protection equipment for local health care workers. Courtney has set the goal of manufacturing 500 face shields per week at the STEM Gym.

Bowery has taught computer-assisted design, 3D printing for more than 10 years at Northeast State. He is one of many industry professionals who brought his knowledge to the college following a diverse career in industrial manufacturing.

"We are going to make as many as we can as fast as we can," said Bowery. "I'm going to keep making them until they tell me to quit, or I run out of material."

At the same time, ETSU's Dr. Keith Johnson and Bill Hemphill from the Department of Engineering, Engineering Technology

and Surveying went to work developing a prototype that does not require a 3D printer. Their goal was to develop a product that can be assembled using supplies available at hardware stores and is also comfortable to wear.

The face shield design uses materials donated by Eastman. Pieces of the shields are cut from a template using a laser engraver. All the face shield parts are collected and put into kits that will be assembled by Facilities Management staff at ETSU. Andrew Worley, emergency management specialist, will assist with shield assembly and ensure staff adhere to all COVID-19 work precautions, including social distancing.

"This is truly a team effort and we are working as quickly as we can to get the materials and people in place to produce as many face shields as possible," said Johnson, chair for the Department of Engineering, Engineering Technology and Surveying. "Our goal is to produce 1,000 face shields per week. This is a great opportunity for us to do something to help people across the state and right in our community."

ETSU is working closely with STREAMWORKS. Quick work and tweaks to their 3D printers have reduced printing time to two hours per headband.

"It's a multi-prong approach – we're working together to make sure we get the right plastic for the shield," said Dennis Courtney, executive director for STREAMWORKS. "Times like this, when the need is urgent, we are focusing on effectiveness, quantity and speed of delivery. We want to do our part to make sure that our community stays safe by doing what we can for our health care heroes."

CADD designs and photos of the face shield Johnson and Hemphill developed are available to anyone with access to the necessary equipment and supplies. Hemphill, who is well known for his guitar-making classes at ETSU, has shared the designs with other STEM guitar makers across the country. He has repurposed ETSU's guitar-building lab and his courses to meet this immediate need.

"I told my students that the world changed while they were on spring break," said Hemphill, an associate professor in the College of Business and Technology. "I told them we would be dropping the assignments we were working on and focusing on real work. I told them to come up with designs and I will build it."

Although students are taking classes remotely for the remainder of the spring semester, they are focusing on ways to produce and assemble personal protective equipment in an educational lab setting. One class has been assigned to create a mold that would bend the plastic shield to contour around the face.

"Every now and then I have a bright idea and I have asked students to share theirs," Hemphill said. "We will keep testing ideas and exploring ways we can help during this crisis."

Founders Forge hosts free webinar for businesses on Going Virtual

The idea that some employees don't have to be glued to a desk chair to be productive is certainly nothing new. But until now, remote-working has been in large part the province of entrepreneurs; employees of large, travel-intensive companies; and the truly tech-savvy. Today, because of COVID-19, millions of Americans are #suddenlyremote.

SEE REGION, 12



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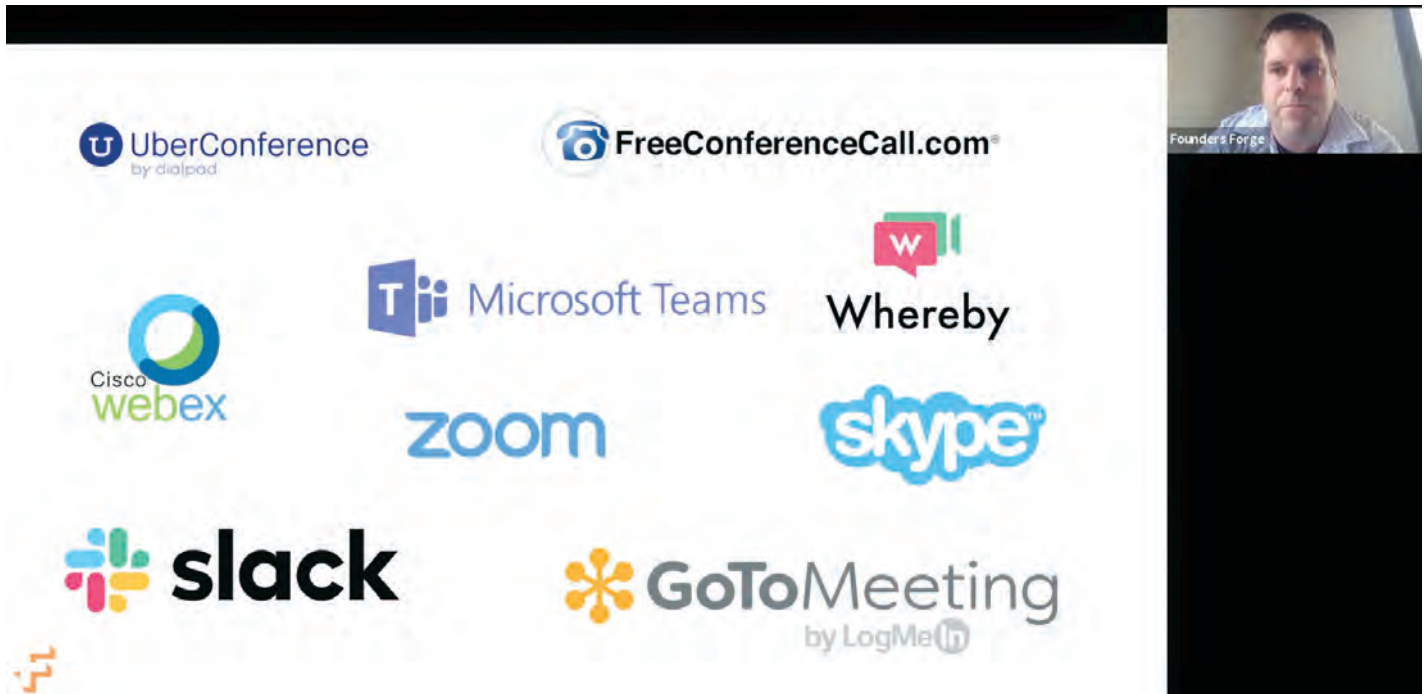
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For business owners who've held out till now but are joining the legion of offices that use web addresses more than a street address, the myriad choices of online meeting and productivity apps can be overwhelming. Microsoft Teams, Google Apps, Zoom, Slack, Trello, Whereby, Gotomeeting.com, Uber Conference, freeconferencecall.com, Monday.com and more all offer budget-friendly small business options, depending on your needs.

A recent webinar held by Founders Forge, a group of small businesspeople and entrepreneurs based in the Tri-Cities, brought some great points to light for those considering how to keep offices running while nobody is in the building.

The first point that stands out as utterly sensible came from Ryan Hayes, a Johnson City-based software engineer. "First, look at the tools you're already paying for," Hayes said.

Founders Forge Best Practices for video conferencing

by Scott Robertson

When working at home, set the stage. Dedicate a specific space and make it feel professional. Clean it, set up a few plants and some artwork. Make sure spouse, kids, roommates, etc., know this space is for work and is not to be infringed upon. Likewise, try not to use the space for anything but work. Then, when going online for a teleconference:

- Wear pants. Literally, yes, but figuratively as well. Even though nobody can see what you're wearing below the desk, be professional. Make it feel like you're at work. Set and keep your schedule. And, if you're saving a few minutes (or an hour) every day from not having to commute, you might want to fill those extra minutes with a little exercise. It can't hurt.
- Always use the camera. Even when it's possible to attend the meeting in audio only, go ahead and show your smiling face. It'll hold you (and everybody else) accountable. Just make sure you're in a well-lit room. You don't want to look like the evil emperor, peering out from the shadows.
- Mute your mic when not speaking. Investing in a reasonably-priced headphone set is not a bad idea. There are relatively inexpensive models out there that don't make you look like you're

in Mission Control circa 1969. Consider using software like voice-meeter potato.

- Resist distractions. You wouldn't drop what you're doing for 45 minutes to watch Netflix at the office would you? On the other side of that coin, set an alarm for break time. Pushing on without respite leads to mental fatigue.
- Announce yourself. Advise your co-workers when you will be "on." If you're available at other times, let that be known to everyone, and try to keep check-ins to early and/or late in the day.
- Visit the watercooler. Random conversations can still be as useful as ever. Have a text thread with friends or a Slack side channel with workmates to talk about things other than work. Connection with others on any level, especially random ideas, can spur on innovation, get you out of ruts and scratch the social itch that is required to keep our minds healthy.
- Consider the pomodoro technique. Enforce discipline on yourself. Work for 25 minutes on a single task with no interruptions. If you realize something else needs to be done, make a side note. Once the 25 minutes is up, break for a few minutes, take care of any loose ends and repeat.

The odds are your office is already set to use Microsoft Teams and/or Google's suite of apps including Meet, Chat and Drive. One feature that's very important for group meetings available on Microsoft Teams, for instance, is real-time transcription. Everyone in the meeting can get a word-for-word printout immediately after the meeting. That saves a lot of scrolling back and forth to find exactly the right statement on video afterward. The hottest app you probably don't already have if you're not an inveterate online meeter is Zoom. "It is very easy to use," said David Nelson, founder of Founders Forge. A key to running smooth meetings, if, for instance, you use Zoom and a client is accustomed to another platform: "Give your clients some grace to test your platform with their different devices. Build in a few extra minutes." Doing so ahead of time could prevent time-sucking glitches during important meetings.

When meeting with one's staff online, Nelson said, it's important to establish a sense of normalcy and order early and often. Yes, you are doing things differently, he said, but you are still the same company with the same priorities and values. "Start your meetings with culture," Nelson said. "And then talk about what you've accomplished since the last meeting, what your agenda is for this meeting and what your goals are."

For most companies, accountability is part of the culture. That may mean asking employees to announce when they "arrive" and "depart" for the day. But if you or one of your team members

is binge-watching Netflix online instead of working, well, there are apps for that too. Edwin Williams, who co-founded Startup Tri-Cities (which recently rebranded as Founders Forge) suggested Productivityowl.com which does annoying things if you dilly-dally too long.

Before every meeting, make sure you and all your employees go on camera and check appearances. Is everyone well-enough lit? During daylight hours, having a window behind your camera generally is better than having just ceiling lights. Is there anything embarrassing behind you? A neat, uncluttered room is a better background than a blank white wall. If you are sharing what's on your monitor, make sure everything on your monitor is directly applicable to the meeting (or at least safe for work).

Finally, leave a bit of "emotional space" for the unexpected. A business meeting would not normally be interrupted by children chasing each other through the room or a snoring dog in the background, but in otherwise tense times, these can be ice-breakers.

United Way organizations across Northeast Tennessee, Southwest Virginia initiate joint campaign

A task force incorporating seven United Way organizations across the region has launched a \$1.9 million fund-raising campaign to help address the challenges posed to families and

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REGION, CONTINUED

individuals in northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia by the effects of COVID-19 and the response to it. The regional taskforce includes United Way of Bristol TN/VA, United Way of Elizabethton/Carter County, United Way of Greater Kingsport, United Way of Greene County, United Way of Hawkins County, United Way of Southwest Virginia, and United Way of Washington County, TN. The funds raised will go both toward meeting short-term emergent needs such as food, clothing and shelter for those hardest-hit in the short term and toward meeting longer-term economic recovery efforts.

“As an organization dedicated to fighting for the health, education and financial stability of every person in our region, we

recognize the impact this virus is making on our communities, but we also recognize the toll it will take on the financial and economic well-being of every person in northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia,” said Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia.

“Our board has acted quickly, along with the other regional boards, to supply these emergency funds to our community partners who are on the front lines of this global crisis,” said Lisa Cofer, executive director of United Way of Bristol, TN/VA. The effort to coordinate the project began last Thursday.

Collectively, the United Ways are striving to raise 19 percent of the \$1.9 million COVID-19 Relief Fund in the first 19 days. “Time is of the essence in helping meet the immediate needs due to the impacts of the pandemic,” said President and CEO of United Way of Washington County, TN Kristan Spear.

An online electronic fundraising campaign allows people to donate to the relief efforts for the pandemic. Givers can text NETNSWVARELIEF to 41444. Givers can also make donations at www.NETNSWVARELIEF.org, or by mailing their gift to United Way, Regional COVID-19 Response Fund, P.O. Box 644, Abingdon, VA 24212.

A regional committee made up of donors to the fund, business and nonprofit organizations, and health and human

SEE **REGION, 18**

Five more tips for those working from home

Courtesy The Johnson City News & Neighbor

During her time as a public relations professional, Mary Ellen Miller has spent a good deal of time working out of her home office.

Miller has found a great deal of success working from home by establishing routines that helped her stay organized, maximize her productivity and separate her work life from her home life. Miller did such a thorough job of creating a clear boundary between her workspace and the rest of her house that she could tell her dog, “Go to work,” and her dog would instinctively trot off to her home office and curl up in his usual chair in the corner of the room.

For those of you who suddenly find yourself working from home during this time of social distancing, Miller offers 10 tips to help you find professional success while maintaining sanity in your personal life during this challenging time.

- Stick to your routine. Whatever you did in the morning before you left for the office, you’ll want to do when you’re working from home. Wake up at the same time. Shower, shave, or put on makeup. Exercise, pray or meditate. In short, keep doing what you were doing before in order to minimize disruption in your daily life.
- Keep your non-work meetings. If you belong to organizations, do what you can to keep your meetings, albeit virtually. If you belong to a church that is not holding Sunday services, find out whether the church is live-streaming services online, and do what you can to attend virtually. Stay plugged in and connected.

- Look for future trends. Once you’ve established a good work routine, start looking ahead to the potential effects of the coronavirus epidemic on your industry or sector. For example, Miller has a friend who owns a retail store in Buffalo, New York. Her friend is starting to focus more attention on her line of baby clothing in anticipation for a time nine months from now when a lot of couples who have been cooped up in the house together might find themselves in the market for her goods.



Mary Ellen Miller

- Be kind. There is plenty of stress in the world, so do what you can to help others when possible. Check in on elderly neighbors, and do what you can to help others get through this tough time.
- Give to the charity of your choice. Giving is an elixir that heals both the giver and the one who receives. If you are able to give, make sure to continue supporting the charities of your choice in the days ahead.



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REGION, CONTINUED

service agencies will direct the disposition of the money raised. Danelle Glasscock, president and CEO of United Way of Greater Kingsport said, "We are committed to helping our communities with long-term recovery efforts in the days to come following this global crisis."

The idea behind the single regional effort is that by bringing the scale of seven United Way organizations to bear, more can be accomplished for every organization, family and individual who needs assistance, Staton said. "We will make sure that the resources we are providing are to partnerships, public and private, that will help enable children, families, and elderly folks that have been most impacted by this get the resources and support they need from health and human service organizations. We're particularly concerned with those organizations and their ability to respond to those challenges due to the fact that they are nonprofits. They have now been limited in their events and fundraising capacities."

By uniting in this campaign, the organizations make it easier for the regional business community to take part, Staton said. "We are united, and we are interdependent," Staton said. "Things in Greene County may look a bit different from things in Elizabethton, and things in Elizabethton may look a little different than things in Grundy. But how are we working collaboratively with regional corporations and foundations and business partners who have the best interest of all those communities at heart? We all sink or swim together. If somebody on the Tennessee side is hurting from this, somebody on the Virginia side is hurting and vice versa."

Economic developers, chambers create RegionAHEAD database

In an effort to make it easier for small businesses in the region to communicate with consumers and to be able to do business with each other, the Northeast Tennessee Tourism Association, the Northeast Tennessee Regional Economic Partnership, NETWORKS Sullivan Partnership, the Chamber of Commerce serving Johnson City, Jonesborough and Washington County, the Kingsport Chamber and the Bristol Tennessee/Virginia Chamber of Commerce have created an online database entitled RegionAHEAD (AHEAD is an acronym for Appalachian Highlands Economic Aid Directory).



Visitors to *regionahead.com* will find a searchable listing of around 200 businesses based in northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia that offer COVID-19-safe business opportunities. In addition, the site offers information on community resources, volunteer sign-up opportunities, and an interactive map of sites where food is available for families and children in need.

"We're continuing to adapt the website on a daily basis to meet the needs of both businesses and consumers," NeTREP CEO Mitch Miller said.

"It's difficult when our industry is dependent upon the public, and it is such a hard decision to temporarily suspend operations, furlough staff, or postpone an event in the best interests of your employees and customers," Northeast Tennessee Tourism Executive Director Alicia Phelps said. "However, there are still opportunities to support businesses in our area by shopping online, gift cards, ordering to-go and delivery services, as well as planning a future trip. There are also businesses that are still open, as well as outdoor opportunities. Right now, the most important thing is your health and safety, and folks are strongly advised to take certain precautions and use their best judgement. This region has a strong sense of community and is unbelievably resilient. This too shall pass, and when it does, the tourism and hospitality industry will be there to support our local economy. We must lean on each other now more than ever." BJ

Food City announces plan to hire 2,500

K-VA-T also works to address strained supply chain, adds employee bonus plan

by Scott Robertson

In a wide-ranging March 24 virtual press conference, Food City President and CEO Steve Smith announced his company has joined a long list of grocery retailers offering increases in compensation for employees. “We are in the process of implementing a bonus payment system totaling around \$3 million to reward our associates for their hard work and unprecedented efforts during this unparalleled time,” Smith said. Kroger, Trader Joe’s, Walmart, Whole Foods and others had announced the implementation of bonus plans or \$2/hour raises in the previous week.

The news came a week after Food City announced plans to hire 2,500 new employees. Smith also asked in the conference that consumers be understanding that everyone at his stores, from new employees to the most experienced, would be dealing with difficult circumstances as best they can. “Please have patience with our associates that are on the front line,” Smith said. “That’s probably the most important thing I’d ask for.”

“Over the last few days, we have done many things to help alleviate some of the bottlenecks in our supply chain,” Smith said. “We, like other retailers, had some people shortages over this past week. We’ve hired 76 additional associates at our Food City distribution center and shifted more than 140 qualified retail associates to distribution center to assist in getting properties to our stores. We’re still looking to hire another 30 associates in the coming days in our distribution center.”

Smith also said Food City is working with food distributors that normally work only with restaurants. In acknowledging the shortages, Smith said they are likely to continue for weeks or even months to come. “I don’t know exactly what gaps and what challenges there will be, but I can tell you there will. We think it’s going to get better but there will be some bumps along the way.”

Seeking to quell consumer fears over shortages of items from toilet paper to tarragon, Smith said food manufacturers and retailers are both working to address

the problems. “To help alleviate some of the shortages, (manufacturers are) reducing the number of items that they are producing and limiting varieties and flavors in order to focus on increasing the productivity and production of their core items. Due to this extreme high demand, we have limited the

number of high demand items in our stores that can be purchased at a given time, to ensure that all of our customers have an opportunity to purchase what they need.”

“I can personally guarantee you our stores will remain open seven days a week,” Smith said. **B**



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1901 Group expands operations to Washington County, Va.

IT services company to invest \$1.15M, create 150 jobs

by Scott Robertson

“Today’s announcement is very important because it sends a strong signal that southwest Virginia is open for business and is focused on attracting high-tech talent.”
– Delegate Terry Kilgore

The Reston, Va.-based 1901 Group, an information technology services firm specializing in cloud services and cybersecurity, will invest \$1.15 million to open an operations center in Washington County, Va., creating 150 new jobs there. Sonu Singh, 1901 Group CEO and Governor Ralph Northam announced the plans for what will be the 1901 Group’s third Virginia operations center at a March 9 press conference in Abingdon. The announcement took place at the county offices, across the street from the Virginia Highlands Small Business Incubator, where the 1901 Group will initially locate.

“Our Commonwealth has the second-highest concentration of technology workers in the nation, and we are happy to see more companies recognize the benefits of locating technology jobs in Southwest Virginia,” said Governor Northam. “1901 Group’s operations across diverse parts of Virginia are benefitting from our world-class workforce and higher education institutions that prepare the next generation of IT professionals for the 21st century jobs offered by the company. We are confident that the Washington County Operations Center will be another success story for 1901 Group.”

The 1901 Group, named for the year in which the assembly line originally reshaped the world of business, is based on a model of engaging the workforce in communities outside northern Virginia, where talent is plentiful but expensive, and the quality of life is hampered by population density.

“I have always had an affinity for this area,” Singh said in making the announcement in Abingdon. “When we were starting this business 10 years ago, it was really about three concepts. We wanted an area with a good quality of living – a moderate cost of living and access to talent. We have already hired a few folks and we know they’re going to be world-class.”

Part of the appeal of hiring in southwest Virginia, Singh said, was that the workforce is expected to stay with the company lon-



Virginia Governor Ralph Northam with 1901 Group CEO Sonu Singh in Abingdon. PHOTO BY SCOTT ROBERTSON

ger than in tech-heavy northern Virginia. “I’ve always said that if you have a good business model – and we think we have a good business model – you add in excellent people, and loyal folks, you end up building a great business. In information technology, there’s about a 25 percent turnover. It’s hard to build a company when one in four people leaves. In our company, there’s about 10 percent turnover.”

The company has already tested its model. The company broke ground on a Blacksburg location in August of last year,

building a 45,000-square-foot facility there. In 2018, 1901 Group expanded its Enterprise IT Operations Center in Montgomery County and its corporate offices in Fairfax County, creating a total of 805 new jobs there.

“1901 Group’s decision to expand its corporate footprint to a third region of the Commonwealth is a strong testament to our competitive business climate, infrastructure, and workforce,” said Secretary of Commerce and Trade Brian Ball. “Virginia provides 1901 Group with one of the nation’s largest tech talent pools to support the company’s rapid growth.”

Incenting the 1901 Group to locate the center in Abingdon (instead of Pennsylvania and Tennessee, which competed for the location) was very much a team effort, Northam said. “It wouldn’t have happened (without) a lot of well-intended people working very hard together to really drive our business, to drive our economy.”

The Virginia Economic Development Partnership and Washington County took the lead on recruitment, but the Virginia Jobs Investment Program was brought in, and the Tobacco Commission approved Tobacco Region Opportunity Funds in the amount of \$140,000 to seal the deal.

“As part of the Tobacco Commission’s efforts to jumpstart economic development in our region, I’m proud to co-chair InvestSWVA which is playing a strategic role in helping 1901 Group develop a high-powered and sustainable IT ecosystem in Southwest Virginia,” said Delegate Terry Kilgore, who chairs the commission. “Today’s announcement is very important because it sends a strong signal that southwest Virginia is open for business and is focused on attracting high-tech talent, a key GO Virginia Region One priority.

“My fellow legislators and the InvestSWVA team have been working directly with 1901’s CEO, Sonu Singh and we look forward to leveraging our relationships in the public and private sectors, so that 1901 Group becomes a vehicle for long-term and sustainable investment in the region.”


“Attraction and growth of technology-driven businesses is critical to our continued efforts to promote economic diversification and long-term community prosperity,” said Dwayne Ball, Chairman of the Washington County Board of Supervisors. “I am pleased that our County and the Washington County Industrial Develop-

ment Authority were able to work together to help this project come to fruition. We are very excited, and we warmly welcome 1901 Group to our community.”

“This is a home run for Washington County and Southwest Virginia,” said Senator Todd Pillion. “We are thrilled to welcome 1901 Group and the quality jobs they will bring to our region. I’m proud to have our InvestSWVA team work closely with them as they create new opportunities for the jobs of the future right here in Southwest Virginia. 1901 Group has an established presence throughout the Commonwealth, and we are proud that the

company recognized our talented workforce, infrastructure, and quality of life as assets for its third installation.”

“1901 Group’s decision to locate in Abingdon’s Small Business Incubator is a smart move,” said Delegate William C. Wampler III. “Washington County is becoming an attractive technology hub, generating new opportunities for businesses and workers in our region. I’m looking forward to supporting 1901 Group’s efforts to build its client base and hire regional tech workers.”

“We’re very, very grateful for all the support and I can guarantee we’ll build a big giant business here,” Singh concluded. 



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YWCA of Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia announces 2020 Tribute to Women honorees

The YWCA of Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia has announced the nine women who will be honored in the 2020 annual Tribute to Women.

Women from throughout the region were nominated by area organizations. Nine were chosen by an independent panel of judges to be recognized. The honorees work to improve and enrich the region and the quality of life for the people living in it. The 2020 Tribute to Women Award recipients were selected for their leadership qualities, positive impact on the community, and demonstrated growth and achievement.

The nine women will be honored in three categories reflecting their impact on the community and region: Nurture, Transform, and Empower. The awards banquet will be held this fall at the Bristol Train Station.

Nurture category

Dr. Jennifer Adler is a mentor, professor and public official. She empowers others to think independently while exposing them to new and different ideas. She works hard to help others, especially women and young people gain success on their own.

As a first generation college student, Adler graduated Phi Theta Kappa from Harvard College. She earned her M.A. and Ph.D. in religion from Vanderbilt University. As a member of the Board of Mayor and Aldermen in Kingsport, Adler has helped the city grow. She holds regular monthly meetings with residents throughout the community. Adler serves as assistant director of the Roan Scholars Leadership Program at East Tennessee State University. She also works with the Girl Scouts. Adler's story empowers young women in our region who don't have familial models of academic achievement. In Adler they see themselves — that they, too, can be a professor, a public official, and a champion for others.

Lori Hamilton, director of healthy initiatives at Food City originally began her career as a clinical nurse. Hamilton's role at Food City involves the care of 16,000 associates and countless customers. She travels throughout the company's four-state marketing area, visiting each of the 132 retail supermarkets. Hamilton has been recognized with many achievements including *The Business Journal's* Healthcare Hero Award and 2018 March of Dimes Nurse of the Year in Public Health. She has developed a comprehensive program that benefits Food City's associates, customers and community partners. Hamilton promotes a holistic view of health including wellness of mind, body and spirit. Many times, mental and emotional health are overlooked or avoided. She believes we must focus our efforts on the person as a whole to achieve lasting behavior

change and overall impact. Hamilton is a strong advocate for health and wellness, and her strong commitment to serving others is evident to all.

Debbie Richmond started her law enforcement career as a dispatcher with the Bristol Tennessee Police Department. She later became one of the first female officers in Bristol. As a patrol officer, she became a role model for women interested in law enforcement. She was later assigned to the Criminal Investigations Division, where, guided by her unique blend of strength and kindness, she became a trusted advocate in the Bristol community, for the most vulnerable victims. Through the death of her father, Richmond recognized that the criminal justice system offered little in the way of victim services. Richmond currently serves as the interim director of Branch House. Her overwhelming desire to serve victims has been especially meaningful to our community in her role as an investigator of child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse.

Transform category

Linda Shepherd is Chief Nursing Officer and Associate Administrator at Ballad Health. Shepherd is a dynamic nursing professional and accomplished health care executive. She embodies many qualities that allow her to be a transformative leader in health care. She has a vision and optimism for the nursing profession, and particularly for nursing in Southwest Virginia. She works to support the professional growth of her nursing team locally and throughout the state of Virginia as president of the Virginia Nurses Association.

Shepherd has, and continues to demonstrate, skill development and growth in transforming not only herself professionally, but also in those she leads through her involvement in many organizations. Shepherd has proven that with determination and a vision for your life, you can achieve what you desire and make a lasting impact for those you serve, despite the challenges you face.

Katy Ford Sikorski consistently leads by example through her willingness to work, positive attitude and dedication to service. As president of the Bristol Rotary Club she guided the club's many community and international initiatives. Under her leadership as Junior League president, Sikorski led the creation of the Caterpillar Crawl, a permanent scavenger hunt in downtown Bristol. While working for the Wellmont Foundation, Sikorski had tremendous success in raising community funds to support critical projects. She currently provides oversight, coordinates and manages clinical deliveries for drug trials. Sikorski is currently responsible for an international

study with 110 sites in 11 countries and a domestic study in 58 U.S. cities.

Sikorski is a strong, well respected woman, and her impact and influence on the community will continue for many years in the future. Her leadership, kindness, openness, strength, courage, service and commitment to do good in the world enable her to transform organizations and the community at large.

Jamie Swift plays a significant role in the safety of people throughout the region, as well as within the system's 21 hospitals and many other facilities as the director of infection prevention at Ballad Health. She brings a remarkable level of knowledge and expertise to her job. She is one of the country's primary experts in the region on infectious diseases, and her guidance in the community on how to prepare and react to the threat of these diseases has been crucial in recent weeks.

Swift has led the collaboration of multiple health organizations regionally to address the overuse and misuse of antibiotics. She has participated in or led numerous committees and councils related to safety and infection prevention within the health system and the community, and has traveled around the country to make presentations to national and infection prevention within the health system and the community, and has traveled around the country to make presentations.

Empower category

Becca Davis is a visionary in the Tri-Cities. She is the co-founder and executive director of ReFrame Association, which supports affordable housing rehabilitation and repairs for low-income people throughout the United States, ensuring homes are safe, healthy and more livable for residents. Davis has been involved with low-income home repairs since she was a high school volunteer. She empowers nonprofits by identifying and sharing their best practices, educating them in sustainable repair methods and techniques for improved volunteer recruitment and retention. She is also a founder of 100+ Tri-Cities Women Who Care, a platform she created. Davis has empowered 250 Tri-Cities women to give back to their community.

Davis has had a passion for helping the least fortunate for over two decades. This

has manifested in various ways through her studies, career, and volunteer activities.

Dr. Shelley Koch's teaching philosophy at Emory & Henry College has been shaped by her personal journey, with one foot in the world of ideas and one in the world of work life. She believes she has a responsibility to help students connect what they are doing in class, with their lives and with their communities; whether it is their local neighborhood or the global society. Her students learn from one another; even when discussing polarizing topics, such as race, gender, religion and economic status. Koch is a powerhouse in Southwest Virginia and has served on the board of Appalachian Sustainable Development and Appalachian Peace Education Center. She has also published books and articles focusing on food and society.

Koch believes a sustainable planet and a peaceful world will be the result of young people passionate about engagement that breaks down barriers and increases understanding.

Dr. René Rodgers played an integral role in the development of the Birthplace of Country Music Museum while adhering to the high standards of the Smithsonian. She became the curator of Exhibits & Publications in 2016, continuing her role in scheduling and creating vibrant and diverse special exhibits and educational programming. Rodgers helped to establish the annual PUSH! Film Festival in Historic Downtown Bristol, VA-TN. Rodgers led the effort in her church's involvement with Family Promise, a program for the homeless. She also established a partnership with the Bristol Public Library to form the Radio Bristol Book Club, a monthly program airing on Radio Bristol that explores the literature of the Appalachian region.

Rodgers personifies grace under pressure and inspires others through her tireless work ethic and methodical approach to problem solving.


The annual Tribute to Women banquet, which will be scheduled for a date later this fall, will honor the recipients. Funds from the event help to support the mission of the YWCA, including efforts to increase the economic empowerment of women and families, promote women's health and safety, and to support racial justice and civil rights. B



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bioPURE ahead of the game on Coronavirus

Tri-Cities-based company product on EPA Coronavirus disinfectant list

by Scott Robertson

Jim Wilson knew his company, bioPURE, had an opportunity in front of it back in January. He had no idea the scale.


On January 28, bioPURE put out a press release touting the company's bioPURE CLEAN product's ability to kill "superbugs like the Wuhan Coronavirus."

"Cases of the deadly Wuhan coronavirus continue to be reported in the US and around the world," the release continued. "The Wuhan coronavirus currently has been the cause of at least 80 deaths and the number of confirmed cases has passed 2,700 currently. A second case of Wuhan coronavirus was reported in the US this past weekend as well. The treatment used by bioPURE has been registered with the EPA to kill coronavirus as well as other viruses prevalent this time of year."

bioPURE is a sub registrant to the Performacide product (EPA #87508-3). The bioPURE CLEAN EPA number is 87508-3-95339. According to the EPA, "While disinfectant products on this list have not been tested specifically against SARS-CoV-2, the cause of COVID-19, they are expected to be effective against SARS-CoV-2 because they have been tested and proven effective on either a harder-to-kill virus or against another human coronavirus similar to SARS-CoV-2."

Wilson said the company's work with college football programs has provided anecdotal data regarding the product's ability to kill viruses in institutional settings where large groups of people touch common items. The first was East Tennessee State University. "Scott Carter (ETSU's athletic director) called and said they had had an issue with MRSA in the football program," Wilson said. "So, we did a partnership with them and we started advertising with them. That led us to Furman University. So, we do Furman University and all their athletic program and then Furman led us to Clemson University football this previous football season. They just told us about a week ago that this is the lowest number of flu cases they've had in their football program in history."

The fact that bioPURE is just entering into selling franchises as the worst virus attack in our lifetimes is hitting is fortuitous for the company. The question in marketing it, however, is how to take advantage of the circumstances without appearing to take advantage of people's misfortune.

"Going forward we're right where we need to be," Wilson said. "The standard of 'clean' has changed. People are looking at the television every night and they're seeing people with equipment spraying things and they're hearing this is a proper disinfection. This is how you kill a real enemy of a bad virus. We've been having to paint the picture for them. Now the picture's been painted when you sit down and talk to them about coronavirus." 



Founders Jim Wilson and Brandon Kinder



ETSU uses bioPURE to clean the football team's weight room in the minidome.

New Dates announced for the 2020 Tennessee Valley Corridor National Summit

The Tennessee Valley Corridor (TVC) has announced new dates for its 2020 National Summit celebrating 25 years of innovation in transforming the region. The Summit will now be held July 15-16, 2020 at Milligan College in Johnson City, Tenn. As the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak continues to impact daily life, organizers felt this postponement would help ensure the safety and well-being of the hundreds of participants and attendees from across the Tennessee Valley.

The TVC's annual National Summit is a two-day event designed to share information and advance collaboration between our region's federal, educational, community and business leaders. The 2020 Summit also celebrates the founding of the TVC in 1995 with the theme: Twenty-five years of innovation transforming a region.

Summit Sessions will showcase the collaborative spirit of our host region, the Appalachian Highlands and provide key updates and discussions from across the Corridor on America's national security, energy and environment, education and workforce, and science and space exploration.

Major Sponsors for the important event already include: East Tennessee State University, Eastman, Protection Strategies, Inc., Dynetics, Tri-Cities Airport, Morning Pointe, BWX Technologies, Bristol Tennessee Essential Services, the UT Institute for Public Service, The Business Journal of Tri-Cities TN/VA, City of Johnson City, SunTrust Bank, Boston Government Services, Strata-G Solutions, Energy Solutions, and Tennessee Strategies.

Representing twelve congressional districts working together across the Tennessee Valley region in Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Alabama, the award-winning TVC regional economic development group has supported federal science and technology missions in the Corridor for more than two decades.

Over the past 25 years, the TVC has worked to advance important federal missions and expand federal investments in the Corridor to create more private sector job opportunities across the region. Today, federal investment in the region tops \$75 billion annually and directly employs more than 150,000 people across 82 different federal agencies in the Corridor.

The Corridor is supported by its Leadership Council, whose members include Consolidated Nuclear Security, TVA, University of Tennessee, Teledyne Brown, NASA, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Seven States Power Corporation, Oak Ridge Associated Universities, Tennessee Tech University, UniTech Services Group, and UCOR.

For more information about the Tennessee Valley Corridor and the National Summit and to learn how to sponsor the event, visit www.TennValleyCorridor.org, or email TVC Executive Director Darrell Akins, at dakins@akinsps.

eChemExpo delayed

No date has been announced for the rescheduled 2020 eChemExpo, originally set for April 15-16 at the MeadowView Conference Resort and Convention Center in Kingsport. The expo is generally considered the top multidisciplinary allied innovation event for the process industries. In addition to the 200 exhibitors, more than 60 seminars are planned for the event when it does return, likely sometime in October. The broad range of seminars touches on topics including equipment and instrumentation; process, mechanical, safety and environment; optimization, digital, mobility and safety; digital transformation and emerging technologies; safety and sustainability; engineering, construction and life cycle optimization; modeling; and operational excellence and cybersecurity.

SBA offering economic injury and disaster loans

The United States Small Business Administration has launched an information campaign to make small business owners aware of the availability of Economic Injury and Disaster Loans (EIDLs) in response to the economic repercussions of the impact of the Coronavirus and the effort to limit the spread of that virus. Those loans stand separate from relief offered in the (as of this writing) three stimulus response packages approved by Congress and signed by President Trump.

"This is being offered in pretty much all 50 states and the territories," said Carl Knoblock, SBA district director for Virginia. "This is a loan that goes up to \$2 million. The interest rate for for-profit businesses is 3.75 percent and you can have up to 30 years to pay it back." The interest rate for private not-for-profit organizations is 2.75 percent.

"It is not able to help religious organizations or public non-profits," Knoblock said. "Also, businesses that are tied to gambling and those type of things are not eligible."

The SBA is accepting applications online at disasterloan.sba.gov. "You put in your working capital information – you know, how much you pay rent-wise, what you pay for utilities, employees and suppliers – all that. That determines the amount you'll be considered for. After that, the length of term would be determined after we look at your personal finances and your business finances."

The SBA promises answers on loan applications in 21 days, providing the application is sent in, "totally correct." Knoblock said he advises that all applicants print paper forms of the application before attempting to fill out all the information online. "The paper forms are the same ones that will be online. That way you see all the information you'll be asked for and you can find everything you need. If you do that ahead of time, the process goes very quickly. If you're trying to do everything as you're working online and you forget things or have to go look for them, well, the website is running on the clock, so you could accidentally get kicked off."

In addition, the SBA offers assistance for EIDLs at 800.659.2955. Knoblock also offered *Business Journal* readers his direct line: 804.986.8901.

VCEDA continues making business loans at record rate

Clinch River Hemp, Co., West River Conveyors secure seven-figure loans

The Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority (VCEDA) finished 2019 having taken part in more than 50 business start-ups and expansions in Southwest Virginia, and 2020 looks to be an active year as well.

\$2 Million Low Interest Loan for Clinch River Hemp Company

A low-interest loan of \$2 million from VCEDA to the Russell County Industrial Development Authority will be used in the development of Clinch River Hemp Company, LLC's processing facility operations and the up-to-62 new jobs it will bring.

Clinch River Hemp Company, LLC (CRHC) is a new start-up company, which says it will provide services from hemp cultivation, through extraction, processing and packaging of hemp products. The CRHC plant will focus on refining hemp for the therapeutic benefits of CBD and other plant-based chemical compounds that can be derived from hemp.

The new business will be located at Hansonville in the former Freedom Ford car dealership building. Forty-one new full-time jobs and five part-time jobs are anticipated within the first year as the project gets underway.

"The loan funds provided by VCEDA to the Russell County IDA are being used for the purchase of the facility for this project and equipment," said Jonathan Belcher, VCEDA executive director/general counsel. "Within five years, the business is projected to grow and according to the application, job numbers are anticipated at 58 full-time and four part-time by the fifth year."

Russell County IDA Chairman Ernie McFaddin said the CRHC project should be considered a regional initiative. "The Russell County IDA was pleased to be able to work out a revenue sharing agreement between Russell, Buchanan and Tazewell counties which will benefit all three counties on this project."

A program offered by CRHC will also benefit area farmers, according to VCEDA. The program will provide hemp clones and seeds at a low upfront cost to farmers in the region, thereby helping the farmers to grow hemp at a reduced cost per acre. Hemp seedlings will also be grown on-site. A research and development lab will also be a part of the plant facility.

"Clinch River Hemp Company has almost completed the build-out of a state-of-the-art hemp processing facility with the capability to process 10,000 pounds of hemp per day," said Jeff Taylor, CEO of CRHC. "It will be one of the largest processing facilities of its kind in Virginia and in the top three percent in terms of processing capability in the United States."

Taylor said the plant will be capable of processing 3.5 million pounds of hemp per year, which equates to 3,000 to 4,000 acres of hemp, dependent on yield per acre. As the facility is expanded in the future, it is anticipated additional job creation and tax generating endeavors will be added to include indoor grow facilities, greenhouses, drying facilities and more to complement



(L-R) Kerry McCormick, National Hemp Group COO; Jeff Taylor, Clinch River Hemp Company, LLC CEO; Ernie McFaddin, Russell County IDA chairman; Jonathan Belcher, VCEDA executive director/general counsel; and Jean Jordan, VCEDA funds administrator

the processing hub.

"This biomass will create estimated gross revenues for Southwest Virginia farmers of \$40,000,000 annually," Taylor said. "Our facility will have the ability to scale and add additional extraction units based on demand."

\$1.225 Million Loan for West River Conveyors and Machinery Co. Expansion

VCEDA also closed on an up to \$1.225 million loan to West River Conveyors and Machinery Company in Buchanan County in March. The funds will be used in the expansion of West River's business which is anticipated to add 12-15 new full-time jobs in the next 10 years.

"West River Conveyors and Machinery Company (WRCM) is an established Buchanan County business, having operated in the county for nearly 40 years," Belcher explained. "The company has continued to grow, adding new markets to its service area and growing its job numbers through the years. VCEDA is pleased to assist them in their latest expansion and in helping them to create the new jobs that are part of this project."

The VCEDA loan funds will be used toward an approximately 8,000-square-foot building expansion, construction of a covered in-feed conveyor shed and concrete pad and the upgrade of equipment, which company officials said will result in better operating efficiencies and the ability to take on additional work at

West River's Oakwood location. The replacement, or addition, of several items of equipment is also planned and will include a CNC plasma table, CNC plasma beam line, sandblasting system, compressor, 3D scanner, shelving and software. Some of the new capabilities will allow West River to better evaluate customer assemblies for manufacturing fit, while providing analysis tools for product simulation and the ability to create visualization of systems for customers.

"This expansion is part of our growth strategy which has been developed over the past two years," said Pete Savage, WRCM vice president of Business Development. "It will greatly improve our work capacity and help us to become more competitive in our current markets and allow us to continue to expand our business into new areas."

West River was founded in 1981 and was incorporated in Virginia in 1985. It is one of the largest manufacturers and private employers in Buchanan County. West River is owned 50/50 by its two founders, J. B. Roulett (president) and Joe G. Street (vice president). The company designs and manufactures conveyor systems and equipment, builds belt drives, discharge/transfer stations, tail sections, take-up units, power packs, starters, belt storage units, winches and many unique fabrications to customer specifications. West River sells belt and structure as part of its conveyor packages and also sells new and used conveyor parts.

West River currently serves the coal, aggregate, gypsum, phosphate, salt, potash, and trona mining industries. Conveyor parts (gears, reducers, couplings, etc.) have been sold to the paper/wood, zinc, recycling/waste management, agriculture, construction, mills, marine terminals, energy/power plants and steel industries.

Building on a strong year

The West River Conveyors and Clinch River Hemp announcements continue a trend of high activity for VCEDA, which participated in 50 new projects and expansions in 2019, the highest number in the authority's 31-year history.

Those projects and expansions are projected to create 575 full-time and part-time jobs and more than \$29 million in private investment. Projects approved during 2019 are building or expanding in all eight localities in the VCEDA service area of Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell and Wise counties and the City of Norton.

"Not only did VCEDA set records in 2019 for the number of loan and grant approvals and loan and grant closings, but also for the number of marketing events and prospect visits in which VCEDA was involved, making 2019 the most active year in the history of VCEDA," Belcher said.

Some of the projects announced during the year included Canadian manufacturer Polycap's decision to locate its first U.S. manufacturing facility in Russell County, bringing with it 65 jobs; the Paul's Fan Company back-to-back announcements of an expansion in Buchanan County and its new endeavor in Lee County, bringing a combined total of 55 new jobs and retention of 42 jobs; the Sykes-Intuit expansion bringing 154 jobs to Wise County; the Carbon Research and Development Co. bringing with it 35 new jobs to Wise County; and the Lawrence Brothers Inc. expansion in Tazewell County which will bring 28 jobs. A number of tourism-related projects also were announced in 2019.



(L-R) Scotty Wampler, Buchanan County marketing director; Jonathan Belcher, VCEDA executive director/general counsel; Pete Savage, West River Conveyors and Machinery Company vice president of business development; and Eric Alsop, West River project manager

VCEDA approved nine loans and 48 grants during the year, the highest number in VCEDA's history. Those loans and grants totaled more than \$18.8 million. Thirty-six of the grants approved were to assist new business start-ups in the region through VCEDA's Seed Capital Matching Fund. Since 2017, VCEDA has approved seed capital grants for 70 new business start-ups in the region, involving a projected 616 full-time and part-time jobs and more than \$4.2 million in private investment.

VCEDA participated in 35 marketing and business development events, the most in VCEDA's history. Several of these were done in conjunction with the Virginia Economic Development Partnership. Establishing relationships with site consultants and others involved in foreign direct investment (FDI) continued as an outreach target area.

VCEDA was also involved in 70 prospect visits during the year, the most ever recorded by VCEDA. The authority handled 174 inquiries throughout the course of the year. These inquiries and prospect visits ranged from industrial prospects to new business start-ups.

"VCEDA is now using a multifaceted approach to economic development, which continues to involve traditional industrial recruitment and supporting the expansion of existing industries, but also includes assisting new business start-ups and promoting the growth of the tourism industry in the region," Belcher said. "We believe that this more comprehensive approach to the region's economic development will yield better results than only focusing on just one or two elements."

2019 began with three vacant industrial shell buildings in the VCEDA service area and one under construction. It ended with three of them sold – including the one under construction. One of those buildings had been on the market for more than a decade.

"The level of activity and interest in our region during 2019 was notable," Belcher said, adding, "the success that VCEDA and the coalfield region enjoyed in 2019 was made possible by a team approach. Elected officials, economic, community and workforce developers, educational institutions, localities, industrial development authorities, private businesses -- including the coal and natural gas industries -- are team members who are key to positive progress in our region." [B1](#)

Food City recently announced the appointment of **Tammy Baumgardner** to the newly created position of senior manager of Public Relations. Baumgardner brings more than 32 years of industry knowledge and experience to this key role, including 22 years in media and community relations.

"Tammy's broad experience inside our organization makes her uniquely qualified for this very important role," says Steven C. Smith, Food City president and chief executive officer. "As we continue to grow, I know of no other person more suited to communicate with our customers, our associates and the general public than Tammy."

Baumgardner began her retail career with Food City in 1987, after graduating Abingdon High School. She has served in a number of positions, including accounting clerk, receptionist, administrative assistant, executive assistant, assistant office manager, retail pricing specialist, loyalty marketing coordinator, promotions coordinator and most recently, marketing/events coordinator.

Baumgardner's new duties include the oversight of Food City's media and public relations department. She is also responsible for the management of a number of Food City's sports marketing initiatives, including their NASCAR title sponsorship at Bristol Motor Speedway and other special events and projects. Baumgard-




Tammy Baumgardner

ner also serves as a board member for Food City's Charitable Foundation, which benefits area charitable organizations.

Terri Roop, a lifelong Southwest Virginia resident and experienced healthcare professional, has been named associate vice president and administrator of Dickenson Community Hospital. In her new role, Roop oversees all patient care and operations of the 25-bed critical access hospital. She was promoted after a successful tenure as the hospital's director of patient care, a position she held for six years.

"Ballad Health's Southwest Virginia hospitals have been my home for nearly 20 years, and it's my extreme honor and privilege to serve in this role for Dickenson County," said Roop, a registered nurse. "This is an exciting opportunity, and I look forward to guiding our team members as we work together to strengthen our hospital and improve our community's health." Roop began her career at Norton Community Hospital as a registration clerk for the hospital's radiology and emergency departments. After earning her bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Virginia's College at Wise, she transitioned into a nursing role in Norton Community's emergency department, eventually becoming its clinical coordinator.

"Terri has the experience in our hospitals and communities to perform this job admirably, and the Ballad Health leadership team and I are fully confident in her insights and abilities," said Mark Leonard, vice president and CEO for Wise and Dickenson counties. 



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A word from Virginia US Senator Mark Warner

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has sickened hundreds of thousands of people around the world, including many cases here in Virginia. Since the outbreak began, my top priority has been to provide our nation and our Commonwealth with the tools we need to fight this pandemic and help workers and small businesses make it through these tough times.

We will get through this challenge, but it is important that we all work together to stop the spread of the virus and help our economy recover.

In the Senate, I have been working around the clock pushing for a robust coronavirus response by the federal government that includes Virginia priorities. So far, the Senate has passed three major bipartisan coronavirus response bills designed to aid in the fight against the virus and help workers and small businesses:

- **PHASE I:** On March 6, the President signed a bipartisan \$7.8 billion emergency funding bill that directed needed resources to federal, state and local agencies responding to coronavirus. This legislation immediately provided Virginia with \$13.3 million in federal funding to help cover the costs of preparations for this public health emergency. It also included language based on my CONNECT for Health Act of 2019, which reduces restrictions on the use of telehealth for public health emergency response, as well as \$500 million to facilitate its implementation.

- **PHASE II:** On March 18, the President signed a second bipartisan coronavirus response bill that focused on the immediate economic impact of the coronavirus. This legislation greatly expanded paid sick leave to many Americans, made it easier for workers who've lost their job or had their hours cut to apply for unemployment insurance, and guaranteed that coronavirus testing will be free. It also included significant emergency funding for Medicaid, nutrition assistance, state unemployment programs, and coronavirus testing at VA medical centers.

- **PHASE III:** On March 27, the President signed a \$2 trillion coronavirus relief bill intended to help workers who have lost jobs or paychecks due to the coronavirus, loans and grants to rescue small businesses, as well as hospitals and local governments facing financial strain because of the coronavirus. Specifically, the legislation provides emergency cash payments to Americans, a small business rescue plan, a "Marshall Plan" for America's hospitals, and a significant expansion of unemployment insurance.

For days, I was in direct negotiations with Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and my colleagues from both parties, working to include specific provisions that would help Virginia workers and local businesses, including:

- **Disaster Unemployment Insurance:** to increase the amount and duration of unemployment benefits and expand eligibility to include hourly workers, gig workers, independent contractors, the self-employed, and others who would have otherwise fallen through the cracks in our system.

- **Foreclosure and eviction protections:** to provide borrowers of federally backed mortgages with forbearance for up to 180 days

on mortgage payments. Additionally, the bill includes a provision that would impose a moratorium on all foreclosures for at least 60 days.

- **Small Business Paycheck Protection Program:** to provide small businesses with loans of up to \$10 million that forgive up to 8 weeks of payroll and other costs if the business retains its employees and their salaries.

- **Employer Retention Tax Credit:** to encourage companies to keep workers on the payroll so they can maintain their employer-sponsored health-care and have a job to return to when the crisis is over.

- **American Worker and Main Street Lending Facility:** to provide low-interest loans to help small and medium-sized businesses keep workers on the payroll.

- **Employer Participation in Student Loan Repayment:** to encourage companies to assist in paying off their workers' student loans, the legislation includes provisions from my bipartisan Employer Participation in Repayment Act.

- **And other provisions, including:** protections for small business government contractors, cash advances and debt relief for small businesses, and eased restrictions on accessing emergency funds in your 401K.

In light of the significant size of this legislation, I also worked to ensure that the bill includes robust worker protections and transparency measures to make sure taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely. This includes restrictions on stock buybacks and excessive executive compensation for companies receiving government assistance, as well as full, real-time reporting of government loans to companies, and an inspector general to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse.

In the coming weeks, I plan to continue working on legislative solutions that will help our country overcome this epidemic and help our economy recover.

Due to safety precautions being taken to decrease the spread of COVID-19, the novel coronavirus, delivery of all physical mail to my office may be significantly delayed. If you are in need of individual assistance, please contact my office using the form at www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/helpwithfederal-agencies and please be sure to provide good contact information so my staff will be able to reach you.



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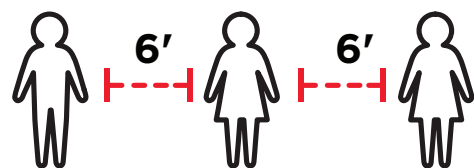
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