

The Business Journal

of Tri-Cities Tennessee / Virginia journal.com

**256,746
reasons
to smile**

**The RegionAHEAD Local
Business Recovery Fund
helped businesses on both
sides of the state line**

**Plus
NETWORKS and NeTREP
get down to business
and
Why BrightRidge signed
a 20-year deal with TVA**

Pictured: (L-R) Ashley Shutt, Beth Rhinehart and Mitch Miller

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Mitch Miller, Ashley Shutt and Beth Rhinehart, RegionAHEAD volunteers.

PHOTO BY ERIC DONAHUE

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40 Under FORTY

A SALUTE TO EMERGING
STARS OF OUR REGION

Are there rising stars in your company? Overachievers who are under 40?
Now is the time to give them the recognition they deserve!

You can be a part of the recognition process by nominating a young businessperson who excels both professionally and in service to his or her community. It's never been easier to make your 40 Under Forty nominations. Just visit 40under.com and follow the instructions.

All 40 Under Forty nomination materials are due no later than September 15.
Nominees must be 39 or younger as of October 30, 2020.



40 Under Forty honorees will be featured in the December issue of The Business Journal.
Deadline for nominations is September 15, 2020. Nominate online at 40under.com

Healthcare Heroes? Too many to name



Every year, the August issue of the *Business Journal* is devoted to Healthcare Heroes, a salute to 25 individuals and organizations that go above and beyond the call of duty in providing a healthy workforce and customer base for the businesses of northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia. As with so many things, the COVID crisis of 2020 forced us to change our plans.

Our July Healthcare Heroes event was cancelled, because of course it was. I cannot imagine the cruel irony of being responsible for someone going into the ICU or worse because they attended an event we sponsored for healthcare workers. We hope no one takes the cancellation of the live event as in any way denigrating the work these heroes do. Just the opposite is true. We canceled it out of respect for what they have been and are trying to accomplish.

There will still be a class of Healthcare Heroes for 2020. There just won't be a live event. Business Journal staffers will visit the heroes' places of employment, appropriately masked and respectful of social distancing and any other restrictions in place. We'll share their stories with you next issue, along with pictures from the trophy distributions in the field. And just as in every year past, we think you'll be touched by the dedication, the compassion and the remarkable skill the honorees have shown.

One other thing will be different, though. The 25th and final Healthcare Hero Award in this year's class of honorees will not be judged. It will be given by the staff of the *Business Journal* to every single frontline healthcare worker in the region.

It is difficult for us to put into words the admiration we have for these individuals, whether they be doctors, nurses, technicians, first responders, or any other job that can put them in direct contact with COVID-carrying patients. Their heroism has been repeated day after day, night after night for months without relief or respite. Their heroism has been dedicated to fulfilling a higher purpose – of doing every single heroic thing they've always done, but with added danger to themselves and their loved ones. Their heroism has been dedicated to attaining the noble end of saying, yes, this is a worldwide pandemic that kills on every continent, but today we will fight it here.

On top of that, they have to deal with a kind of patient they've never had to deal with before: COVID-scared misbehavers. Last month, I went into precautionary quarantine for a week when a friend I'd spent time with felt symptomatic after visiting a relative who later passed away from COVID-19. When I was drive-through tested, I was pleasantly surprised by how discomforting it wasn't. An acquaintance had referred to the deep nasal swab test as, "the brain stem massage," and had asked the nurse who administered it if she had been taught waterboarding by the same people who taught her how to give that test.

I'm as big a fan of fun snark as anybody, but I just didn't see that the nurse in question needed that kind of "kidding." So, when my test results were delayed – they initially told me it would take 4-6 days; it took 20 – I resisted the urge to grumble about the excessive on-hold times, or the fact that every day, somebody had to sheepishly tell me the results still weren't in-hand. I have a hard time believing everyone else whose results came back two weeks later than expected was so patient.

And those were just ladies working at a call center. The frontline healthcare workers still have to deal with the belligerent drunk they're loading into an ambulance – only now the drunk might have COVID. They still have to deal with the mentally ill patient who won't sit still for an x-ray unless someone is physically holding her – only now she might have COVID-19. But now, they have to deal with the anti-masker who proudly proclaims, "I don't believe in that stuff," in a hospital where people have died from "that stuff."

So, to our ubiquitous 25th Healthcare Hero, we offer the best tribute we can. We ask everyone reading this to wear a mask, to socially distance, and to do whatever you can to minimize the need for this kind of heroism to continue too terribly much longer. Let these people go back to being run-of-the-mill, everyday heroes, saving our lives in all the ways we'd grown accustomed to.

Warp Speed to a Vaccine

by Dr. Phil Roe

Earlier this year, the Trump administration launched a partnership between the federal government, scientific community and private sector called Operation Warp Speed. The goal of this partnership is to develop 300 million doses of a safe, effective vaccine by January 2021 to fight the COVID-19 coronavirus. Congress has already provided nearly \$10 billion to develop a vaccine through emergency legislation like the CARES Act, which I proudly supported, and thanks to the Trump administration's leadership and American ingenuity, our country is well on its way to developing a vaccine in record time.

The name "Operation Warp Speed" refers to the incredible speed at which we are developing a vaccine. Typically, the development process from start to finish takes about four years. However, just months after the coronavirus reached U.S. soil, we already have a number of vaccine candidates nearing the final stages of clinical development. Earlier this week, the National Institutes of Health announced the beginning of a Phase 3 clinical trial with 30,000 patients for a possible vaccine candidate, and more are expected to start soon. This is the fastest that a vaccine for a novel pathogen has been developed. Ever.

Operation Warp Speed has also created an expedited process for distributing the vaccine. Normally, vaccine producers wait until after a vaccine is approved to start developing a process for mass production and delivery. However, this process can take a long time. Operation Warp Speed is shaving months and years off this process by allowing these vaccine development steps to occur simultaneously, rather than one at a time. This means that once a vaccine is approved, we will have doses available for immediate distribution.

It's important to understand that this quicker process will not affect the safety of the vaccine. The vaccine will still go through a rigorous testing and trial process to ensure it is safe and effective. This quicker process simply ensures that there is no delay between approval and distribution to the public once the vaccine has been declared safe and effective.

I look forward to being vaccinated against COVID-19 once a vaccine is readily available. The sooner our population is vaccinated,

the sooner we can all return to our normal lives. In the meantime, we all must do our part to keep our friends and neighbors healthy. Cover your mouth and nose when you will be in close proximity to others in public, stay home if you feel ill, and get tested if you believe you have been exposed to the virus. You can find the testing site nearest to you by visiting the state of Tennessee's website at tn.gov/governor/covid-19/get-tested.

In addition to developing a vaccine, we have made incredible progress toward developing treatments and therapeutics. It's important to remember this is a brand-new virus we have never

seen before and that for the first few months of the pandemic our doctors and nurses were still learning the best way to treat patients. By learning more about the virus and how it affects people, we can ensure that patients who do get sick have better care and better outcomes. We have made significant strides in developing treatments already, and we will continue to do so.

One of the key lessons we have learned from this crisis is how important it is for our country to have stable, reliable sources of

medicine. For years, our country has relied on countries like China to produce drugs and medical supplies. However, earlier this year, China threatened to cut off the supply of medicine to United States during this crisis, which would have had a devastating impact on our country's health. Relying on other countries for vital prescriptions leaves our country vulnerable – especially during a global pandemic. That's why I'm a proud cosponsor of H.R. 6708, the Securing America's Medicine Cabinet Act, which was introduced by Representative Vern Buchanan (R-FL). This legislation would bring pharmaceutical manufacturing back to the U.S. and ensure that our country isn't reliant on countries like China for life-saving drugs. This isn't just a health issue – it's a national security issue.

Our country is working at warp speed to defeat the COVID-19 coronavirus, and I have no doubt that together we will be able to defeat this invisible enemy.

Dr. Phil Roe is the United States Representative representing the 1st Congressional District of Tennessee.



Congressman Phil Roe with Governor Bill Lee and First Lady Maria Lee

Home sale closings spike, pending sales rise in June

Northeast Tennessee home sales roared back into record territory in June. Closings on residential resales were 40.9 percent better than May and up 9.9 percent from June last year. The average sales price was up 13 percent and a new record.

"June was the single best month our market has recorded since the Northeast Tennessee Association of REALTORS (NETAR) began local market tracking with its Trends Report," said NETAR President Kristi Bailey. "Our hot market just got hotter, and what was already a strong seller's market is even stronger," she added.

There were 802 closings in June. The residential average sales price was \$207,699. Single-family closings were 9.7 percent higher than last year, and the average price (\$211,659) was 12 percent higher than last year. Townhome/condominium closings were up 12.8 percent. The average sales price (\$151,737) was up 38.2 percent from June last year.

"New pending sales also saw a small increase," Bailey said. "What did not increase was inventory. We had 2.7 months of inventory at the end of June." Five to six months of inventory is the benchmark for balanced market conditions, she added.

The Coronavirus economic shock has taken a toll on local sales. At mid-year, there were 2,940 closings. That is 675 fewer than the first half of last year. "The opposite is the case with prices," Bailey said. "The residential average sales price is 8.9 percent better than the year-to-date last year. The single-family average is up 7.5 percent, and the townhome/condo average is up 11.7 percent."

The average single-family resale that closed in June was on the market for 103 days. The average was 72 for townhome/condo sales.

Meanwhile, new pending sales also

increased in June. It was a small increase from May's total, but it was a clear signal the market is not cooling off.

There were 889 new contracts (pending sales) at the end of the month – up from 881 in May. The moving average trend was 12.8 percent higher than June last year.

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. 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.

June's pending sales reinforce June's market performance as a banner month for closings and prices. It was the first time since the Trends Report began tracking the local market that closings broke the 800 a month mark. The average residential resale price of \$207,699 was also a record high.

"The biggest – and most frustrating challenge – for buyers is the region's continued lack of inventory," said Bailey. "There were 886 new listings in June. But it was not enough to keep up with buyer demand and didn't provide any overall relief," Bailey added. "Active listings at the end of June were down 36.8 percent from June last year."

June's median listing price (\$206,336) was up 13.3 percent from last year, while the median sales price (\$173,200) was up 8.3 percent.

NETAR's Trends Report reflects housing market conditions in Carter, Greene, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington counties in NE Tennessee and Scott, Lee, Wise, and Washington counties in SW Virginia. It also includes market data from the region's primary city markets. **BJ**

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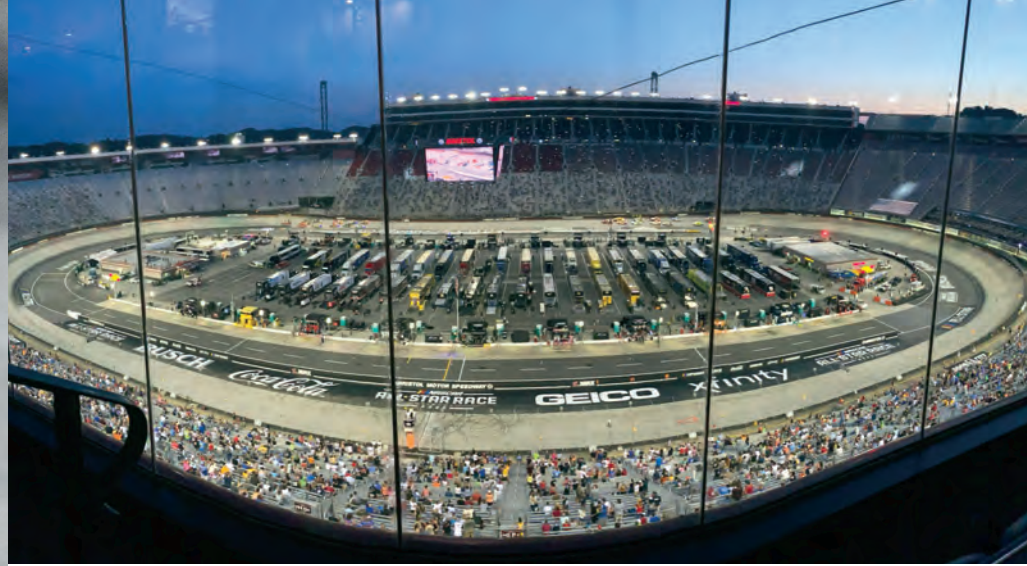
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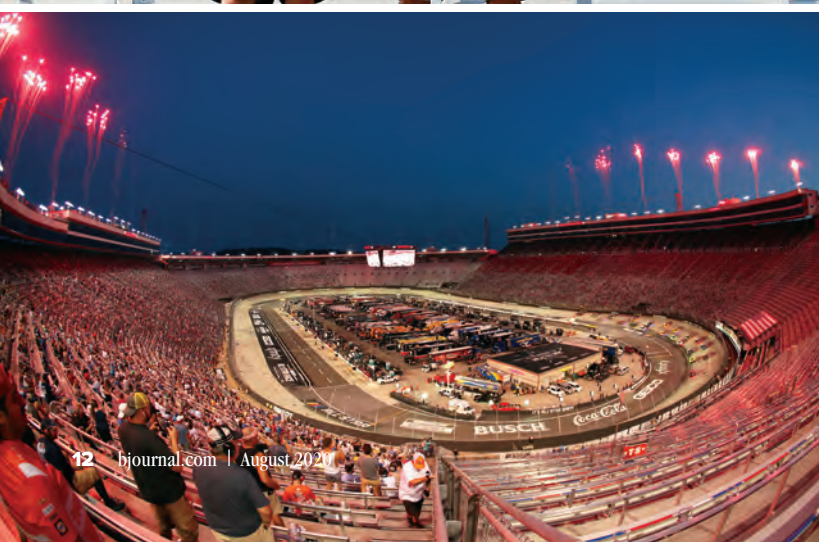


2020 NASCAR All-Star Race

Bristol Motor Speedway hosted the All-Star Race for NASCAR's Cup Circuit July 15, utilizing a combination of social distancing and other safety precautions owing to the COVID-19 crisis. While the track offered 30,000 tickets for the event at the 160,000-seat venue, around 22,000 fans attended the event. Masks were mandated for all areas except the seats, where parties were spaced at greater-than-six-foot intervals. NASCAR's reigning most popular driver, Chase Elliott, won the race itself, following in the tiretracks of his father Bill, who won the All-Star Race the only other time it was held away from its traditional home at Charlotte Motor Speedway. While the rate of COVID-19 cases continues to rise in northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia, Health Department officials say there has been no community spread rise that can be attributed to out-of-town fans coming to Bristol for the event. Bristol Motor Speedway is next scheduled to host a Cup race Sept. 19.







Innovation, collaboration help SoFHA improve continuity of care



About a decade ago, State of Franklin Healthcare Associates (SoFHA) realized access to care and being available for urgent needs was a priority. SoFHA started building a system to provide urgent care, chronic care, and a higher level of care including IV therapy. Payers provided valuable data on utilization – emergency department visits per 1,000 patients and admissions per 1,000 patients – that helped SoFHA identify a troublesome trend: some of the group's patients were seeking care in emergency rooms for non-life-threatening medical issues, even during business hours. Armed with that data, SoFHA began looking for ways to improve access to care in order to allow patients to be seen on short notice by SoFHA providers.

"SoFHA has always focused on providing our patients immediate access to compassionate high quality care," said SoFHA CEO Rich Panek. "We have partnered with other stakeholders in the medical community to improve our service and will continue to do so in our journey to excellence."

Nurse practitioners and other staff were added at SoFHA facilities to ensure patients with acute symptoms would be able to seek medical attention for non-life threatening issues immediately, which improved continuity of care. Additionally, a walk-in clinic was opened in order to give SoFHA patients access to quick care at a facility that had their complete medical records on hand. An acute care clinic for patients who needed 2 to 3 hours of care, including IV therapy, was also started.

As time went on, it became apparent that a gap still existed as research showed SoFHA patients were making visits to emergency departments most frequently during the hour before the primary care clinics opened and the two hours after they closed. Amanda Clear, SoFHA Chief of Payer Relations and Value Contracting, said that once the hours at the walk-in clinic were extended, it didn't take long to get positive results.

"That was an instant change, and within two weeks of expanding those walk-in clinic hours, we saw our emergency department utilization decrease, because we were then available when our patients desired to be seen," she said.

By 2019, there was indisputable evidence that SoFHA's efforts to encourage patients to seek care at a SoFHA facility when possible had been highly successful. The provider group has been recognized many times as a leader in the state and the nation when it comes to reducing ER visits, and the organization has been asked to share its practices with providers around the country.

"We have been able to reduce emergency department visits by 50 percent compared to other groups in the region or the state," Clear said.

Of course, there are medical situations that require visits to an emergency room, and when a SoFHA patient has to visit the ER, he or she can expect a follow-up call from a SoFHA employee within a week. The call is made by an outreach coordinator and is intended to get an update on the patient's condition, find out if a follow-up



Amanda Clear, SoFHA Chief of Payer Relations, Dr. David Moulton, SoFHA's Director of Quality and Value Contracting, and SoFHA CEO Rich Panek

appointment is needed, and address any concerns a patient might have about medications that were prescribed during the ER visit. The success in mitigating emergency department visits is a prime example of SoFHA's collaboration with payers to achieve the goal of excellence in patient care while finding ways to decrease costs. "The collaboration and data sharing with the payers gives us the direction on the best opportunities to help the patients," Clear said.

Another point of focus was access to care for patients with mobility issues. After reviewing data on ambulance travel, SoFHA created a Home Visit Team of Nurse Practitioners. A SoFHA Nurse Practitioner will drive to the patient's home to see them instead of the patient taking an uncomfortable ambulance ride on a stretcher to the provider's office. This service has increased patient satisfaction, decreased admissions to the hospital and improved overall care.

SoFHA's mission to seek excellence in care includes creating a Clinical Excellence Committee. This group of physicians, Clinical Pharmacists, and Administrators processes data in search of ways to reduce unnecessary or unjustified variation in care that cause unnecessary spending for its patients. Dr. David Moulton, SoFHA's Director of Quality, credited cooperation with payers and a unified commitment to the mission of providing best practice patient care for allowing SoFHA to achieve a high level of success.

"Without a shared vision – Administration, Operations, the Clinical Excellence Committee, and the payers– we would not know how best to serve our patients," he said. 🌟



The RegionAHEAD Local Business Recovery Fund volunteers gathered to celebrate after every dollar donated had been allocated to regional small businesses. PHOTO BY TERESA TREADWAY

One sleepless night generated \$250,000+ for struggling small businesses

Dozens of volunteers took action for the benefit of region's job creators

by Scott Robertson

"I'm 71 years old and I've never lived through anything like the last six months," says Jim Fisher, a small business owner in Jonesborough, Tenn. Fisher and his wife Lynnea were at their wits' end earlier this year. Their commercial greenhouse, Linnaea Gardens, rents decorative plants to businesses and maintains those plants at various locations throughout the region. When you see a ficus tree or arrangement of smaller plants in a bank lobby, for instance, Linnaea Gardens may have been hired to put it there and maintain the aesthetic it provides. But, when the COVID crisis hit, the Fishers and their employees were literally shut out of doing business. "We'd have plants locked in buildings," Jim says. "We couldn't charge for maintenance because the businesses were closed, but we couldn't get our plants back out because the buildings were locked. We were literally watching our inventory die on the other side of locked windows and doors."

It was stories like that of Linnaea Gardens that caused Johnson City-based auto dealer Andy Dietrich to have a sleepless night in early March. Dietrich had spent the day reading and hearing story after story about how the Coronavirus was taking hold in America. Communities were shutting down, and with them the livelihood of business owners like the Fishers had been called into question.

"I was just getting sick. I'd heard too many stories that someone was about to lose their small business because of this," Dietrich says. "I've been so blessed, and these are the people that have always given business to us when things were rocking and rolling. I mean, we're still selling some cars; I can't just sit here and do nothing for these people in their darkest hour."

So, the next day, Dietrich spent seven hours on the phone talking with executives at the Chambers of Commerce and economic development organizations based in the Tri-Cities. After speaking with Miles Burdine of the Kingsport Chamber, Beth Rhinehart of the Bristol Chamber and Bob Cantler of the Johnson City Chamber, Clay Walker of NETWORKS Sullivan Partnership and Mitch Miller of the Northeast Tennessee Regional Economic Partnership, Dietrich's idea was beginning to coalesce into a plan for a radiothon or telethon. He got in touch with retired radio executive Don Raines and the station managers of WCYB-TV5 and NewsChannel 11, WJHL.

The pandemic got in the way of those plans, however, Dietrich says. "It was going to be hard to have 20 different people out there on a dedicated line that's spread out with everybody working from their homes." At that point, Mitch Miller, who had spearheaded the creation of the RegionAHEAD website, offered to put a "Donate Here" button on the site.

But before funds could be accepted, the legal I's had to be dotted and T's had to be crossed. Melissa Steagall-Jones of Blackburn, Childers and Steagall volunteered hours of accounting compliance work, while Joel Conkin of the law firm of Wilson, Worley provided pro bono legal assistance. Because donations were to go to private businesses, they could not be tax-deductible. The organization also had to distribute whatever funds were allocated to each business as grants, not forgivable loans, and the organization had

SEE VOLUNTEERS, 16



Funds were granted and checks presented to 71 small businesses in Tennessee and Virginia, including Paul's Fans, a Grundy, Va.-based manufacturer. PHOTO BY SCOTT ROBERTSON

RegionAHEAD Local Business Recovery Fund

Grants to Virginia Companies Include:

A Likely Yarn Arts, Abingdon
 Abingdon Vineyards, Abingdon
 Advantage Supply Center, Inc., Abingdon
 Catering By Catherine, Abingdon
 Crisp Family Coach, North Tazewell
 Crooked Cabin Properties, Abingdon
 Griffin's Why Not Clothing LLC dba Studio 6, Bristol
 Homeslice Cafe & Catering, Abingdon
 High Tides Tanning LLC, Marion
 Innovative Graphics & Design, Inc., Norton
 J&N Tool and Supply LLC, Bristol
 Jai Jalaram Krupa Inc. dba Knights Inn, Glade Spring
 Magic of Massage Inc. Bristol
 Mountain Empire Gymnastics, Bristol
 Mountain Sports Limited, Bristol
 New China House, Marion
 Olive Branch Day Spa, Clintwood
 Park Avenue Academy of Cosmetology, Wise
 Past Time Antique Emporium, Marion
 Paul's Fan Company, Grundy
 Play Date DBA Play Now, Abingdon
 Pocahontas Off Road, LLC dba Real McCoy Cabins, Pocahontas
 Powers Fitness, LLC dba Body Works Fitness & Training Center, Abingdon
 Salon Bristol, Bristol
 Signature Salon LLC, Bristol
 Stone Mountain Adventures, LLC, Norton
 The Gallery at Barr Photographics, Abingdon
 The Outlet Store, Grundy
 Trailhead Lodging LLC, Bluefield
 Universal Crane & Construction. Grundy
 White Birches Inn LLC, Abingdon
 Wise Lumber & Supply, Inc., Wise

Grants to Tennessee Companies Include:

A Clean Connection of Tri Cities LLC, Kingsport
 Appalachian Light & Production LLC, Telford
 At Your Services LLC, Elizabethton

Best Uniform Center, Kingsport
 Bob's Dairyland, Inc, Roan Mountain
 Bolton Ventures, LLC dba Quantum Leap Trampoline Sports Arena & Badl
 Axe Throwing Arts, Kingsport
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 Express AV LLC, Bristol
 Fanatics 101, Johnson City
 Hair Additions, Johnson City
 Highrise Medical Supply LLC, Johnson City
 Jump TN LLC, Greeneville
 KDBlaine Enterprises LLC dba Downtown Yoga Center, Johnson City
 Kindermusick Room, Jonesborough
 King's Sport Axe House, Kingsport
 Linnaea Gardens Inc., Jonesborough
 Merle Norman, Elizabethton
 Mountain River Guides Inc DBA USA Raft Adventure Resort, Erwin
 Mountain Empire Comics, Bristol
 North Main Audio Customs Inc., Greeneville
 Nolichucky Gorge Campground & Cabins, Erwin
 Pennyman's Diner, Johnson City
 Plant Palace Florist & Gifts, Erwin
 Plaques Etc., Kingsport
 Simple Elegance Tennessee, Jonesborough
 Sports Image Inc., Kingsport
 TasteBudz Accommodations, Johnson City
 Taylor Made Grooming Lounge, Greeneville
 The Station at 19E LLC, Roan Mountain
 The Wooden Hanger, Kingsport
 Timber!, Johnson City
 Union Street Gallery LLC, Erwin
 Union Street Taproom. Erwin
 We Run Events LLC, Bristol
 Wood Service Center Inc., Kingsport

VOLUNTEERS, CONTINUED

to complete its business by the end of the year. Within a few short weeks, all of that had been accomplished to the satisfaction of both the Tennessee and Virginia state governments.

The next step was publicizing the fact that a place existed where individuals or organizations could make donations with 100 percent of the money going to help small business owners across the region. A Zoom meeting was quickly scheduled with advertising agencies, creative companies and print media joining the broadcasters who were already on board. Tony Treadway of Creative Energy, Chris Bowen of Cumberland Marketing and Ashley Shutt of ARO Creative came on board. The media all donated promotional time and/or space in their traditional and digital products.

Shutt's firm had been hired to design the original RegionAHEAD website, which was designed to give small local businesses the chance to freely advertise that they were still doing business during the pandemic, and to state whether they were allowing customers inside, offering pick-up service, or doing business entirely online. Once the campaign activated, ARO offered its services without compensation, and easily put in the most hours of any organization involved in the effort.

Because ARO was orchestrating the website, Shutt and her team worked to create the online pay portal through which donations could be accepted. In addition, her team created the forms that applicants would fill out online to submit for consideration. The criteria for consideration were written by Miller, with input from Scott Robertson of the *Business Journal*, who researched similar efforts elsewhere and offered best practices; Burdine, who provided input based on the Leadership Tennessee consideration criteria and rubric and Scott Jeffress of the Roan Scholars program at East Tennessee State University, who offered input based on that program's consideration rubric. In addition, Claudia Byrd of Speedway Children's Charities volunteered input on how to avoid potential pitfalls while maximizing the efficiency of the project.

As donations began to pour in, Bob Cantler oversaw the finances in an account provided (along with a donation) by a regional financial institution that prefers to remain anonymous. At the same time, applications were also arriving in volume. Again, Shutt's team took responsibility for cataloguing every application for consideration by the allocations committee, which would be made up of individuals from Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia who donated their time to read and carefully consider each applicant's information.

By this time, Chambers of Commerce and other individuals interested in supporting small business in the region had joined

the Zoom calls updating the progress, so that around 35 people from Greene County, Tennessee to Tazewell County, Virginia were taking part in soliciting donations and making small businesses aware of the opportunity to obtain funding.

The first of three \$50,000 donations received by the effort came from BrightRidge (the former Johnson City Power Board). "I mentioned it to (Washington County, Tennessee Mayor) Joe

Grandy, and he said the county commission had been looking for ways to help the citizens of the county," Dietrich said, "and Joe's also on the BrightRidge Board." Grandy spoke with CEO Jeff Dykes and they agreed to discuss with the BrightRidge board the possibility of making one or more sizable donations.

After the initial BrightRidge donation was announced, Dykes made a point of saying the donation was for



Andy Dietrich at Big Daddy Dotson's in Grundy, during a trip delivering checks to small businesses assisted through RegionAHEAD. PHOTO BY SCOTT ROBERTSON

use through the entire region, not just the BrightRidge service area and that, "BrightRidge's hope is others will see the need of the small business person in our area and support the Region-AHEAD initiative." That wish came true when Ballard Health matched BrightRidge's donation.

An anonymous committee volunteered the time and effort to read more than 200 applications from Greene County, Tenn., in the west to Tazewell County, Va., in the east. Grants were awarded in amounts ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000.

Shutt and her team at ARO took the data in each nomination and prepared it for the allocations committee, saving committee members hours of work in determining such details as the relative completeness of each application. "We were just happy to be able to make a contribution to other businesses in our community," Shutt said of the long hours her staff worked.

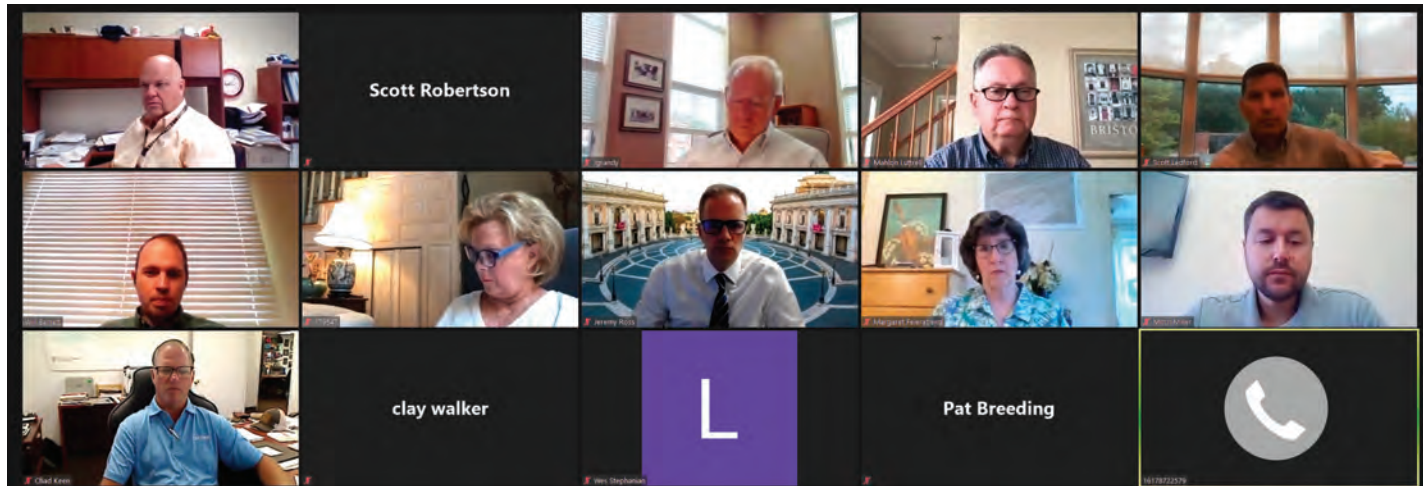
In all, \$256,746 was raised and distributed to small businesses across the region. "I am pleased to announce that following our final allocations committee meeting today, we have officially awarded 39 Tenn., businesses totaling \$147,996 and 32 Va., businesses totaling \$108,750," Rhinehart said in closing out the account. "Our allocations committee did an exceptional job of reviewing every application we received and working to insure all those that submitted requests for grants were given fair consideration. This program has been very rewarding for myself and my peers and seeing how our community partners responded to the needs of our region has made me very proud to call this area my home."

As for Linnaea Gardens, the business applied for and received a grant from the fund. "We're delighted," Fisher says. "We appreciate everyone who made this possible, and look forward to using these funds to help as we move to what I'm sure everyone hopes will be better days ahead." ■

NETWORKS, NeTREP board committees hold candid talks

Three meetings in one week drive potential action

by Scott Robertson



Screenshot of the third meeting, July 28 on Zoom.

When the full boards of NETWORKS Sullivan Partnership (NETWORKS) and the Northeast Tennessee Regional Economic Partnership (NeTREP) met in late June to discuss a potential merger of their economic development efforts, the main action item instituted was the formation of three committees: one to discuss scope, another to discuss structure and a third to discuss governance. Several members of both boards expressed disappointment that the talks were being routed back from high-level to committee, however, so the leadership of both boards agreed that the three committees would meet once each, allow for a clear airing of concerns and possible solutions, and then report back to the executive committees of both boards, so that any loss of momentum would be minimized.

The meetings were held July 23-28 via Zoom. The first meeting, held the afternoon of July 23, focused on scope and purpose. The governance meeting was held the afternoon of July 27, and the structure meeting took place the following morning.

Scope and Purpose

“I think it’s important for us to get our thoughts on the table about what the scope of this organization needs to be from where we are now to where we’re going in 10-20 years, and keeping that in mind in our conversations,” Caldwell said.

Will Barrett began the conversation by showing slides with information on the purpose and scope of regional economic development organizations that cross state lines. While cautioning that this region can’t simply copy and paste what some other region is doing, Barrett said, “I think it’ll help start the discussion.

They’re all kind of different but they have a similar mix (to ours).”

The first region identified as somewhat analogous to ours was South Bend – Elkhart, Indiana.

- Purpose: Increasing per capita personal income in the region, enhancing the economic well-being – the prosperity growth and inclusion of the region through an improved economic structure.
- Scope: Talent attraction/retention, industry growth, entrepreneurship, workforce development, inclusion.

The next was Quad Cities, which had several very specific demarcations of purpose, all to be achieved by the year 2030:

- To attract 54,000 more 25- to 34-year old professionals to make up 13.5 percent of the population
- Sixty percent of Quad Cities citizens will have post-secondary credentials

- Per capita will increase by 20-30 percent to \$52,183
- Gross regional product will grow to \$40 billion
- Poverty trends will reverse
- Civic pride will increase

Quad Cities’ scope:

- Drive business investment in core industries – leverage effective public-private partnership
- Advocate for cool places throughout the region and investments in all downtowns
- Grow the region’s population and create community leaders
- Help businesses succeed in uncertain economic conditions
- Provide stable backbone support to achieve the collective vision

SEE TALKS, 18

Finally, the committee looked at the two regional economic development efforts underway in and around Chattanooga, the Greater Chattanooga Economic Partnership and Thrive The GCEP's purpose:

- Increase Awareness of the 16-county Chattanooga region as a business location
- Accelerate job creation
- Generate capital investment
- Strengthen and diversify the 16-county region's economic base

Thrive's purpose:

- Inspires responsible growth through conversation, collaboration and connection in the tri-state Chattanooga region
- Convenes stakeholders across the region to ensure that as it grows in industry, prosperity and population, the region preserves community and natural character for generations to come.

The committee then heard from Mark Fuller, principal of ROSC Global, the consulting firm that has been part of the regional economic development conversation since being brought in by private sector leaders two years ago. Fuller suggested the organizations had done the right thing by addressing purpose and scope first.

"I think purpose should drive scope," Fuller said. "If you don't know what you're trying to do, why are you doing it? Let's have a definition of victory before we mount up the troops."

"Looking around the world at organizations that have been more successful than not, one thing I could say is that they all have been purpose-driven. In fact, there is no real competitive organization that's been built and sustained for any length of time that is not purpose-driven."

Fuller also cautioned that organizations are generally more successful in meeting broad purposes than narrow purposes. "That doesn't mean you don't have specific metrics about the broad purpose – so you get specific metrics on per capita income or population growth, but a really prosperous region is paying attention to health issues, education issues and economic development in an integrated way, not one or the other."

With all that as preamble, the committee got down to discussing purpose and scope. Philip Cox of the NeTREP board put forward the idea of population growth being well within the scope of the merged organization. Cox also pointed out weaknesses in the way the region is being marketed now, especially externally. "The most I've seen that have been promoted through economic development are just videos – there's not a lot of good data."

"We're in commercial real estate, and we had a possible tenant contact us. One of the brokers in our office had to find some information on the region. They had to go to three different sites. There was not a centralized place to get data. He spent three days gathering data."

Most members of the committee agreed that the two existing organizations already have existing strengths in traditional economic development (through NETWORKS) and lifestyle marketing (through NeTREP), but that both organizations could benefit from a unified voice speaking to Nashville and Washington on both of those matters.

"I think scope would be traditional economic development and non-traditional tourism, marketing and workforce development. I know the entrepreneurship ends up being a bit of a catch-all, but some type of effort around that – probably with more alignment with some other organizations that already are out there on several fronts. And, I think another piece is some type of unified government relations effort at the state and federal levels so that when we're going for something that really is going to make an impact in our region, we're using one voice."

Outgoing NETWORKS board chairman Bill Sumner summed up the afternoon's discussions with, "to promote the people, culture and natural resources to grow the region's economy and population."

Governance

Barrett, the outgoing chair of the NeTREP board, began the meeting by stating that while most everyone has agreed that both the public and private sectors need to play a role in governance of regional economic development efforts, "there's been a lot of talk too about who needs to be a part of this from community organizations, social organizations, the non-profit perspective."

Barrett asked Rab Summers of Summers-Taylor, a member of the NeTREP board, to recall the last regional economic development effort, the Regional Alliance for Economic Development, a decade ago, and comment on what lessons could be learned from its governance. Summers said only that the previous effort, "didn't have much, to be honest with you."

A copy of an Alliance marketing piece was shown that included private sector leaders at the front of the document, but relegated public sector players and economic development professionals to the back. Not-for-profit sector leaders were not mentioned.

Summers referred instead to the current governance of NeTREP. "It has been operating with a fairly large board, but a focused executive committee," Summers said. "You don't get anything done in a meeting with 30 people or more."

Summers also lobbied for a preponderance of private sector representatives on the executive committee. "The private people are much more likely, in my mind, to be regional."

"It's going to be hard for Kingsport, Bristol or Johnson City elected or appointed officials not to have more concern about their home community, whereas businesspeople don't really care as much. If it lifts up the region, it's going to lift up them."

Barrett suggested having a large steering committee or board that gives general direction, with, "an executive board that is 10 folks or less that meets more frequently and accomplishes a lot of work."

Wes Stephanian of ROSC Global suggested that whatever the governance turns out to be, it achieves active participation, inclusion and voice for public, private and non-profit entities.

Bristol, Tenn., City Councilwoman Lea Powers pushed back against Summers' supposition that the public sector entities would be less inclined to be regional in mindset or action. "Should we try to limit the public sector's participation?" she asked redundantly. "I think it would be unfortunate for the organization itself."

Powers said the public sector will continue to communicate with taxpayers what's being done in economic development and, "it's going to be our economic development staff that's going to go back and work with the private sector."

Johnson City Mayor Jenny Brock then said preparation and

planning on the front end could prevent some public/private acrimony. “This has to be a very high-level functioning corporate board that has fiduciary responsibility and that is statutorily empowered to do certain things. I think politics has to stay out of it, and I think one of the key things is that that board be set up with a very strong set of bylaws that govern the board itself, so that if you do get a rogue person appointed to it, it’s still going to be able to be governed through that structure.”

Structure

The city government of Bristol, Tenn., showed up in force for the meeting on the topic of structure. Four-fifths of the City Council was on-hand, leading some to wonder off-line whether the meeting constituted a sunshine law violation. Mayor Mahlon Luttrell was joined on the call by Powers; Margaret Feierabend, immediate past mayor and city councilwoman; and Chad Keen, city councilman.

In her introductory remarks, Feierabend said, “I think trust is huge and I think we are lacking a lot of it in our area. I think it’s critical to moving forward, so I think trying to figure out the best ways that in any process we’re building trust at the same time.”

Fuller followed Feierabend’s statement with an invitation for everyone to be totally honest during the discussion. “Whether it’s trust, whether it’s fairness, whether it’s inclusion of the smaller communities, I think it’s really important that this group be very frank and candid with one another, that we can enhance the building of that trust. No organization of this kind is going to function properly if there isn’t clear communication and if there isn’t an increasing level of trust.”

Fuller also cautioned against trying creating a structure which tries to do too much too soon. “I think it’s really important that we identify the core, the fundamental, the absolutely-required set of activities that the organization must deliver, as opposed to all the activities it might perform over time.”

Feierabend pointed out that the other regional organizations referred to in the first committee meeting are all “mature.” She asked that more research be done to see what those organizations looked like when they started out. She then suggested that the group step back from merging, saying, “Maybe it’s more coalition work before it’s all under one umbrella.”

Powers followed that up with another suggestion that perhaps a step back might be in order, merely because Bristol has invested so much in doing things the way they have been done. “We (Bristol) have had a dedicated employee economic developer for the past 20 years in Bristol, and now we have actually three (Tom Anderson, Matt Garland and John Luttrell who works in economic development and community development and relations) and we work with April Eads at BTES. Along with that, as a part of NETWORKS, we have worked very diligently to develop product and the result of that is the BTES Business Park, Partnership Park II...We have spent 20 years positioning ourselves for where we are now. It didn’t just happen overnight.”

Responding to Keen’s earlier rhetorical question of “What have we got to lose?” Powers said that because Bristol taxpayers also pay Sullivan County taxes, they are essentially paying twice to support NETWORKS and its \$15 million bonded indebtedness. “We can’t walk away from that,” Powers said. “And so to come into a new organization, what more is that going to cost us financially, given the fact that we have our own internal constructs

through our three economic developers that are being paid by either our utilities’ rate payers or through our tax revenue?”

“I always like the thought we may be small in size but we are mighty in actions,” Powers continued. “We’ve been very pragmatic and we’ve been very disciplined financially to do what we have done and so now it’s like there’s going to be this new construct of which we will be in a much-diminished capacity. How do we guarantee our position moving forward at the capacity we are now? In an organization where we may not have as much of a voice, what we rely on that trustworthiness to assure us that it’s all going to be just fine.”

Powers went on to list private sector actions that have eroded her trust in the process, including the ramming through of the Appalachian Highlands brand and the radio silence from NeTREP when she asked that they put forward a competing plan in response to NETWORKS CEO Clay Walker’s “Right Time for the Right Organization in July 2019.”

Outgoing NETWORKS Chair Bill Sumner agreed that more transparency will be necessary moving forward. Some people in Kingsport equate regional economic development with Ballad Health, which they view negatively, he said.


As the meeting was winding down, Barrett suggested that he, Caldwell, Cox, David Wagner and Jeff Dykes, representing the boards of both organizations, take what had been discussed in the three committee meetings and open a dialogue with the First Tennessee Development District’s board, which is made up of mayors of every city, county and town in the eight northeastern-most counties of Tennessee.

Feierabend expressed concern that none of the NETWORKS executive committee members are public sector representatives. Sullivan County Commissioner Mark Vance told the committee, “I truly believe if it came today to the point of decision-making the county commission would not support this.”

“That’s very alarming,” Vance went on to say, because we could be turning down something that could be very beneficial for this whole region. I think we’re going to have to better communicate with our elected officials and work this thing at a slow pace.”

Powers volunteered to represent the public sector when the group meets with the FTDD.

Fuller provided closing remarks, saying, “at the end of the day, this does belong to the people. They are going to be the beneficiaries or the victims of all that we do, and their fundamental needs have to be kept in mind as we’re doing it. The second thing has to do with focus. We as a region are disproportionately inwardly focused. I think keeping in mind the voice of external constituencies – tourists, potential investors, etc, is very important. I’ve spoken with potential collaborators in Virginia and they all say the same thing, which is, ‘you guys have to get your act together and speak with a single voice.’

“The last thing I want to say is moving towards as close as possible to a one-stop shop is the best demonstrated practice around the country and around the world...I personally believe the need is urgent now. Some comments have been made that we are behind. But, the flip side of being behind is the genuine wealth of opportunities. It’s an opportunity-rich region by any standard, so if we can get a greater level of trust and a greater level of cooperation, I think those opportunities can be realized.” 

ETSU's Noland lays out current plan for fall semester

"This is a very fluid situation."

by Scott Robertson

When ETSU President Dr. Brian Noland spoke with the *Business Journal* in May regarding planning for the fall semester, Noland said, "there are unlimited things for which we have planning uncertainty." Time, however, waits for no institution of higher education, and planning uncertainty has had to give way to the certainty of the university offering fall classes.

This should not, however, be interpreted to mean ETSU knows exactly how the semester will play out, Noland said in a virtual town hall July 31. In fact, Noland intimated, the one certain is a level of uncertainty. "We look forward to the energy that emerges when this campus is able to engage in our teaching, research and service missions, but we recognize that this fall is going to look different than falls prior."

The most obvious difference will be the marked increase in the number of sections and courses making extensive use of online learning. ETSU is a campus of roughly 14,500 students. This fall, the greatest number of students scheduled to be on campus at any one time is 3,300. "That will happen around 11 a.m. on Thursdays," Noland said.

"Around 18 to 20 percent of our courses will be on the ground. The bulk of those are courses that by virtue of the instruction embedded within the course, have to occur on-ground," Noland said. "I have a family member who has a career desire to be a welder, and as he reminded me earlier this year, you can't learn to weld online. You have to do it on the ground. Many of our courses have that similar type of relationship."

Most of the courses on campus will be taught with a hybrid mix of online and on-ground coursework. "But the significant volume of our courses, almost half, will be provided in an online format," Noland said.

"The faculty have driven the delivery structures," Noland added. "We did not set a goal, as many institutions in the country did, to require X percent of our courses in delivery format A or B...those decisions were driven by faculty, and they were driven in an effort to ensure the health and safety of our students."

If the low density of students on campus is to be the most noticeable change for the fall 2020 semester, then the ubiquity of masks will be close second. Noland announced in late July a policy change mandating masks for everyone on campus. Noland had, earlier in the month, stated in a post-trustees meeting press conference he was "appalled" at the number of people not wearing masks when he and his family were out shopping. Since that time, Noland made it clear his desire to see the effects of the Coronavirus minimized by the use of masks has not changed, but his semantics have.

"People are motivated to change when the ask to change comes from a place of kindness, and we've all talked about being good



East Tennessee State University President Dr. Brian Noland

neighbors, of grace and patience and compassion, and not trying to take this from a place of shame and blame and argumentation.

"I think all of us need to recognize that we're trying hard to be good neighbors, but we also need to recognize that our general rule is that base covenants are required on campus, both within our classrooms as well as other indoor areas – as well as outdoor areas where physical distancing cannot be maintained by at least six feet," Noland said. "This policy was put in place for the health and safety of everyone who calls ETSU home."

Some faculty have asked if they could wear transparent face shields when lecturing instead of masks, citing clarity of speech and ease of lip-reading for students with hearing deficits. "Masks are a required portion of the campus experience," Noland

succinctly answered. He immediately followed up with a disclaimer that the university understands some accommodations will need to be made for certain medical conditions, and gave a number to call to apply for such accommodations. Faculty and staff will not need to be masked if they are alone in a room with the door closed, Noland noted, which should make it discourse easier during online courses.

"We will have wipes in every classroom and we will have masks in every classroom," Noland continued. If a student appears for class without a mask, the professor or instructor will politely offer that student a mask. If the student refuses to wear one after being asked more than once to do so, then the faculty member will ask the student to leave, reminding the student that if they are uncomfortable wearing a mask, then the university offers alternative instruction online for the class.

As for how the administration will handle potential changes is the COVID environment during the course of the semester, Noland has already put forth a four-stage plan, with stage four being "wide open" and stage one being "shut down."

"I can assure you as a campus we are planning for multiple contingencies," Noland said. "But at this juncture, we are moving forward in the manner with all the safety protocols we've spent the summer working on. We have spent the summer procuring PPE, misters to clean the campus – the work we've done from an academic preparation perspective and from a housing perspective. As we're working through this for the fall, there's not one data metric alone that will inform our decisions. They'll be informed in a holistic manner, but in the event that we need to adjust course, we'll do so accordingly.


"But, I don't see us adjusting course as abruptly as we did in March," Noland continued. "We cannot close our research laboratories....so I do not envision us transitioning to a hard phase one as we did in March, but we are preparing structures and protocols if we have to move between phases.

Part of Noland's confidence the campus can avoid shutting down entirely is the planning that has gone into dealing with students who live on campus and test positive for COVID-19. "We have more than 4,000 tests that are on campus now through our ETSU healthcare services, and our direction with those tests is to

ensure that any student, faculty or staff who desires to be tested can be tested here on campus." Tests are not mandatory for students arriving on campus, Noland said, but, "I think you'll see a depth and breadth of random testing this fall."

And with test results now taking as long as 20 days to come back from the largest commercial labs, the university has set aside entire buildings for students who have tested positive for COVID-19 or are awaiting the results of COVID tests. "We have structured services for students so that there will be meal delivery service and daily check-ups so that we are closely monitoring and student who has tested positive and is

in quarantine, or a student who is deeply concerned about displaying symptoms."

The keys to a successful fall semester will be preparation and vigilance. The university has spent the entire summer consumed in preparation, Noland said. Now the transition to vigilance begins. "We are closely monitoring the data around us. If we need to make adjustments we will do so, but I think we are in a benefitted position by virtue of the leadership of the academic aspects of this campus, where more than 80 percent of our courses are online or hybrid, which positions us well as we move through the fall to ensure academic integrity and academic quality." 



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Sync.Space success story

Ashley Shutt, co-founder of ARO Creative, reflects on the growth of her business and her experience with the business accelerator

by Hannah Swayze

In what used to be part of the Sync.Space offices in downtown Kingsport, the ARO Creative Inc. team attempts to carry on business as usual. Part of the team works from home, due to cautionary measures related to COVID-19. Others maneuver around an office mid-renovations. Employees video chat with coworkers to show off an impressive new light fixture and catch up on work which has piled on lately.

The small, women-owned business ARO Creative Inc. was founded by Ashley Shutt and Samantha Culbertson three years ago. It is an advertising agency with six employees, three of which were just added in the past few months.

"I would say we probably have around 40 active clients right now," Shutt said. "That ranges from... international corporations to mom-and-pop local businesses to startups."

The agency provides a whole host of creative services for their clients which include but are not limited to branding, marketing, strategy and high-quality content creation and design. Notable campaigns featured in the company's portfolio include work for businesses and projects like LC King Denim, General Shale and the "This is Kingsport" movement.

Many aspects of ARO Creative Inc., from the use of creative partnerships to the caliber of work the agency produces, makes the company unique. Its origins are no exception.

In the beginning, Shutt and Culbertson's office was in Sync.Space— a business accelerator and co-working space in Kingsport. The small business outgrew their shared space in roughly a year.

"Accelerator spaces and coworking spaces in general— sometimes they exist in the same space— there is just that aspect of collaboration and teamwork that we have always liked," Shutt said. "So, I think that's what probably drew us there to begin with."

ARO Creative Inc. is collaborative in its operations, relying not only on their own creative talents but on that of their creative partners. These include members of their production team, which are part of an Emmy Award-winning company out of Knoxville and other agencies in Nashville. Local partners include entrepreneurs like Tara Burns of Branded and Tara Hodges of Tara Hodges Photography.

"A lot of businesses are very competitive with other businesses," Shutt said. "They don't want to work with people who are



ARO's co-founders, Ashley Shutt (seated) and Samantha Culbertson, with Bryan Allen, CEO of collaborative partner PopFizz.

in their field. You know, you have all these enemies. Why not instead make all these friends and form all these partnerships and then everyone wins?"

It's an attitude that was buoyed by ARO's experience at Sync.Space.

A place for entrepreneurs

Sync.Space was created four years ago by local entrepreneur Heath Guinn.

"What we're really focused on now is, 'what could entrepreneurship mean, if we considered it a primary component of the economic development strategy for the region?'" Guinn said. Sync.Space was the answer to that question and the Sync.Space office was a concrete investment in that concept.

"The Sync.Space was really more about, 'How do we position the opportunity for entrepreneurs?'" Guinn said. "And I break [it] down in a couple ways mainly. How do we help elevate regional entrepreneurs that we have or people who are interested in getting into entrepreneurship or starting a business? How do we help provide more opportunity for them to grow quickly?"

To do that, Sync.Space assists businesses, like ARO Creative when it was originally founded, through connecting them with its local and national network.

ARO Creative Inc., Guinn said, is one result of those efforts. He said Sync.Space's role in the beginning was helping Shutt and Culbertson understand how valuable their talent was and could be and help with rounding out the business, allowing them to focus on what they were good at.

"What they bring to the market is incredibly unique," Guinn said.

Opportunity through others

According to Shutt, the opportunity provided by Sync.Space manifested in the form of mentorships from Guinn and other entrepreneurs.

"When Sam and I started we were 27, and we were two girls in a very male-driven, business-owner area as far as entrepreneurship," Shutt said. "And so, I think proving ourselves was a little bit harder at the beginning, which, I know that every business goes through that, but that was something, particularly, that we had to deal with early on."

Shutt said through Sync.Space, they were introduced to others peers, which was a big deal to their credibility. Then as time went on, they were able to prove themselves through their work.

"The connections that [Guinn] has throughout the state and the mentorship that [Guinn] has given us— that Sync.Space has given us since we started— is really invaluable and we attribute

most of, if not all of our success, to Sync.Space."

The connections also connected ARO Creative Inc. to more potential clients, as startups often have a need for marketing and branding.

Beyond business

Over the years, Shutt said the mission of ARO Creative Inc. has evolved with the business. When they first started out, Shutt said their mission was to create passionate, impactful work for their clients. It still is, but through their community involvement connections they've made over the years, Shutt said it's about more than just ARO Creative Inc. Shutt said the mission is not only to do high-caliber work but to improve the lives of her clients, community members and local businesses. She wants to help the region prosper.

"It doesn't always have to be about client work, you know?" Shutt said.

Shutt is now mentoring others and using her talents to give back to new entrepreneurs and students through organizations in Sync.Space's network like LaunchTN.

Shutt said she believes one person with a good idea can change the world, and that change comes from investing in the people working toward that change and nurturing those Ideas.

"(It can bring) not just change but prosperity and (improved) quality of life," Shutt said "All these things entrepreneurs and startups— their products and their ideas can do that." ■

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BrightRidge CEO: TVA makes 20-year commitment worth it

Johnson City-based utility is early adopter of TVA Partner program

by Scott Robertson

The deal is simple. TVA offers distributors more flexibility by allowing them to generate up to 5 percent of their own power, and in return, the utilities sign a 20-year agreement binding them to TVA.

BrightRidge, the former Johnson City Power Board, became one of the earliest adopters of the deal, and BrightRidge President and CEO Jeff Dykes joined three other utility executives from around the TVA service area to explain why the decision made sense from their perspectives. Joining Dykes on the TVA event via Webex call were Greg Williams, executive vice president and general manager of the Appalachian Electric Cooperative; Chris Davis, general manager of the Cumberland Electric Corporation and David Wade, president and CEO of EPB in Chattanooga.

Dykes praised TVA for making it possible for local and regional utilities to make new power options available to customers and would-be customers. Under the old contract with TVA, Dykes said, when businesses, schools or other entities would ask if there were, for instance, a solar option available, “it was disheartening to tell them no.”

“I see this as an opportunity,” Dykes said. BrightRidge is already making headway toward putting the flexibility to good use, Dykes added, “We have some things in the hopper. We’re working on some solar options for the two school systems and the large university on our system. We’re very close to having that put together.” Dykes said the utility is already working with a developer on the project.

In addition to solar, Dykes said, battery storage options are now on the table for BrightRidge. “Even electric vehicles, you know, we’re looking at how we can really do some things that will energize our communities like home-based fast-charging systems to really meet the needs of growing, changing communities.”

But the big advantage looks to be in helping existing business customers and in recruiting new businesses to the region, Dykes said. “It gives us an economic development advantage. It gives us the opportunity to meet some needs for industries that are already here and may be looking to expand. Now, maybe that expansion will be on my system because we have some incentives we can help them with, but also those businesses that are looking at coming into our area saying, ‘hey, we really believe in green.’ Now, I can provide that for them.”

Still, 20 years is a long time in any business, but especially in energy, where it’s taken less than half that time for American electricity production to shift from coal-dominated to natural



Screenshot of BrightRidge CEO Jeff Dykes taking part in the TVA Power Supply Flexibility Roundtable, July 29 via Cisco Webex.

gas-dominated. Dykes and the other executives were asked about the inherent dangers of tying themselves to any entity for that long. Most answered in terms of balancing the risk of negative changes and volatility vs the reliability of TVA.

“We evaluate the reliability we’ve been afforded by working with TVA in the past,” Wade said. “If we move away from TVA and move just to the investor side of things, we are tying ourselves to a volatile market. We’re tying ourselves to more risk.” Dykes brought up another point. TVA brings prospects to the region, hand-delivering companies to Tennessee communities to vie for new business locations. “I looked at the economic development impact that TVA has had in our communities,” Dykes said. “You don’t see that a lot in the private world, and I came from the private side of the energy business. That has had a huge impact, and that partnership continues.”

In the end, Wade said, it comes down to making decisions utilities believe will offer them the best opportunities to serve their customers, both business and residential, and he credited TVA for being willing to take the first steps away from a monolithic power supply model. “Large-scale generation was the way you (best served business and residential customers), but now we’re entering into a time where there are situations where smaller-scale localized needs can be met with smaller generation. There are also the economies of scale where large-scale generation and transmission provides us resiliency and redundancy. We’re looking at it as solving localized challenges.” **BJ**

Realtors showing former EXIDE plant in Bristol ahead of Chapter 11 sale

A 500,000+ square-foot industrial building on a 46 +/- acre plot of land once home to one of the Tri-Cities' most active manufacturing operations is hosting potential buyers. The former EXIDE battery plant on Exide Drive in Bristol, Tenn., is one of 20 Exide properties in 15 cities and ten states made available in EXIDE's recently announced bankruptcy sale. Exide said in May it has entered into the Chapter 11 process and would be selling several properties as part of a reorganization plan. Potential buyers are being asked to sign non-disclosure agreements before touring the site.

The Bristol plant was the site of a lead acid battery manufacturing operation from 1994-2013. In 2017, the company applied with the state of Tennessee to re-open a portion of the facility, saying it would create 40 jobs. That proposal was shelved based on environmental concerns.

The Business Journal reported in its 1999 Book of Lists that at the time, the EXIDE plant in Bristol employed 1,100 people.

Food City initiates full mask mandate

Food City president and CEO Steve Smith announced in July the grocery chain is requiring customers to wear masks at all of its locations. Smith said the decision was made after a recent spike in COVID-19 cases throughout Food City's footprint, which includes portions of Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee and Georgia.

Food City President and CEO Steve Smith said, "We've decided to have a mask mandate in our stores. People will be required to put a face covering on when they come into our stores, and the reason is we know face coverings are the most successful thing we can do to get this virus slowed down."

Given Food City's presence in four different states, policies regarding masks for customers have differed from location to location. Kentucky and Virginia both have statewide mask mandates in effect, but Tennessee Governor Bill Lee only recently gave county mayors the option of instituting such orders on a county-by-county basis.

Food City began requiring its associates to wear face coverings on May 1 following guidance from the CDC. With Food City associates wearing masks during 8- to 10-hour shifts, Smith called it a "small sacrifice" for customers to wear face coverings during their shopping trips in order to help slow the spread of the virus and help return our region and country to some sense of normalcy.

"We need to get our kids back in school," he said. "Gosh, we want to see high school football, college football. That may sound trivial to some, but it's an important part of our culture in the United States. We want things to get back to normal."

"Help protect yourself, help protect our associates, help protect your neighbors, and help protect the economy, because we don't want to have another economic shut-



Steve Smith

down like we had a few months ago."

For those who do not want to wear a face covering, Smith offered a reminder about online shopping, curbside pickup and home delivery options that exist.

"If somebody has a passion that they don't want to wear a face covering, let somebody else shop for them or let them do their online shopping and pick it up at the curb and keep people safe," he said. "If we'll all work together, 6 feet apart, we can get through this."

Tennessee, Virginia add new grant programs

The states of Tennessee and Virginia both recently announced additional funding for businesses struggling to make ends meet during the COVID crisis. In Tennessee, Governor Bill Lee announced in July a pair of initiatives aimed at shoring up communities negatively impacted by the Coronavirus and the response to it. Lee and the Tennessee Financial Stimulus Accountability Group announced it will add \$115 million to the \$210 million in grants for local governments that were included in the state's fiscal year 2021 budget. Also, the Tennessee CARES program will provide up to \$150 million in grants to not-for-profit organizations attempting to address the ongoing health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Tennessee remains under a state of emergency, which is not scheduled to end until Aug. 29.

Meanwhile, in Virginia, Governor Ralph Northam announced in July the creation of a \$70 million fund to provide \$10,000 each to 7,000 grant applicants, with a focus on small businesses and not-for-profit organizations in economically disadvantaged portions of the state. Rebuild VA will be administered by the Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity. Businesses and nonprofits must be in good standing, have annual gross revenues of no more than \$1.5 million, and have no more than 25 employees.

AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS

Abingdon awarded tourism marketing grant

The Abingdon Convention & Visitors Bureau has received \$10,000 from the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) DMO WanderLove Recovery Grant Program. The grant award is timely, as the ACVB's operating budget has been cut by 63 percent in the current fiscal year.

The WanderLove program is a new grant made available to Virginia's Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) across the Commonwealth that have been heavily impacted by the novel coronavirus pandemic to fund recovery marketing initiatives. \$866,504 in marketing grant funds were awarded to 90 Destination Marketing Organizations as part of the DMO WanderLove Recovery Grant program.

The ACVB will use the VTC WanderLove grant funds to promote Abingdon as an ideal road trip destination, encouraging visitors to travel responsibly while they explore the scenic back roads of Southwest Virginia.

The centerpiece of the grant is a display of public art, with pop-up LOVEworks all over the community. Abingdon is already home to three permanent LOVEworks, as well as a vibrant public art trail. In summer 2020, ACVB invites local businesses and attractions to create temporary LOVEworks, placed outdoors and inside businesses, allowing visitors to wander through Abingdon while sampling the unique shopping and dining.

"It's hard to overstate how important this grant is to the Town of Abingdon," said Director of Tourism Jayne Duehring. "Tourism is the lifeblood of so many of our small businesses, and meals and lodging taxes make up about 28 percent of the town's overall revenue."

"Virginia tourism is a critical sector of our economy and has been heavily impacted by the coronavirus pandemic," said Governor Ralph Northam. "Getting travelers back on the road and spending money in our cities and towns is one of the fastest ways to inject dollars back into our economy and our communities."

The Virginia Tourism Corporation's DMO WanderLove Recovery Grants gives localities the ability to market their destination as safe and welcoming when visitors are ready to resume travel. Tourism is one of the Commonwealth's largest economic engines, with visitors to Washington County spending more than \$110 million in 2018, supporting 1,206 jobs and contributing more than \$2.6 million in local tax revenue.

ON THE MOVE

Ballad Health announced that **Jamie Swift** has been named chief infection prevention officer and assistant vice president of infection prevention for the health system.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Swift been a strong influence in the community, while serving as an essential member of Ballad Health's Corporate Emergency Operations Center. She's served as one of the leading experts for COVID-19 in the Appalachian Highlands region, never turning down an opportunity to educate her community on best practices to stay safe and healthy during the pandemic.

In her new role as chief infection prevention officer for Ballad Health's 21-hospital system, Swift will continue to focus on expanding the infection prevention department. She will also continue Ballad Health's pursuit to become a zero harm health system by continuing to target hospital-acquired infections.

"I'm extremely grateful to serve as Ballad Health's chief infection prevention officer.

For years, I've trained and studied in the field of infection prevention, knowing that a pandemic would likely occur at some point in my lifetime," Swift said.

"Now that the COVID-19 pandemic is upon us, I believe infection prevention is as important as ever in the operations of a health system. I commend Ballad Health and its leadership for recognizing this and investing in the health and safety of our patients, team members and community."

Prior to this role, Swift served as corporate director of infection prevention for Ballad Health and legacy Mountain States Health Alliance, beginning in June 2013. Swift joined Mountain States as an infection prevention manager in July 2011.



Jamie Swift

Jerry Petzoldt Agency is pleased to welcome **Ed Mahaffey** as an affiliate broker in the East Tennessee Tri-Cities market. Mahaffey has spent 45 years in the construction and building materials industry where he worked closely with residential, commercial, and industrial customers.

Mahaffey retired in July 2020 from Builders FirstSource LLC, the nation's largest full-service professional builder supply, where he most recently served as Regional Pro Sales Manager. Previously he served as vice-president of Operations for Tindells Inc. in Knoxville, Tennessee. His industry experience includes professional sales management, sales training, manufacturing, production, purchasing, supply-chain negotiations, and multiple facility supervision. He also has an extensive background in a wide variety of corporate environments including human resources, financial analysis, budget management and operations management. Ed has completed training in Lean Manufacturing, Continuous Process Improvement and APICS Operations Management.

Mahaffey holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Tusculum College in Greeneville Tennessee where he was named to the 1985 "Who's Who in American Colleges". He received the Pro Sales Excellence in Sales award for 2004 and was named the Pro Sales "Dealer of the Year" in 2007. He is a past president of the Credit Bureau of Bristol and the Bristol Tennessee Civil Service Commission. He has also served as the Secretary and Treasurer of the Kiwanis Club of Kingsport.



Ed Mahaffey

Jimmy Martin has been named Senior Credit Officer for east Tennessee at First Horizon Bank. Martin has been with First Horizon Bank for 22-years. His experience includes roles

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ON THE MOVE, CONTINUED

as portfolio manager and team lead in Chattanooga. In his new role, he will also work with clients in Bristol, Johnson City, Knoxville, and Maryville. Chattanooga market president Jay Dale noted, "As First Horizon and IBERIABANK are now one team, we have new opportunities that allow us to do even more for the clients we serve. Jimmy is a great example of someone who has a long history with the bank and gets up every day thinking about what is best for his clients. It's that type of dedication that will serve Jimmy and his clients well."



Jimmy Martin

"I'm excited to get started in my new position," said Martin. "First Horizon has a long tradition of local decision making, and I am honored to continue this tradition. In today's market, having someone with local decision authority who knows our clients is important."

Chad Whitfield has been named partner and managing attorney by The Andersen Firm.

Whitfield joins the firm with more than 20 years of experience in estate planning, asset protection planning, and estate settlement and probate. He spent the majority of his 24-year career as an equity partner in the estate planning group at Hunter, Smith & Davis, LLP.

Whitfield received his J.D. from St. Thomas University School of Law, Miami in 1996 and his B.A. in Political Science and English from East Tennessee State University in 1993. He is a former board member and past president of the Tri-Cities Estate Planning Council, has served as general counsel for the Johnson City Chamber and Johnson City Chamber Foundation, 2011-2019. He was recognized by the *Business Journal of Tri-Cities TN/VA* "Forty Under 40", Super Lawyers, RisingStar and published on Asset Protection in the *Business Journal*. He is a frequent lecturer and speaker on estate planning and tax planning.



Chad Whitfield

Whitfield is an attorney with extensive tax, planning and design expertise within the estate, trust and wealth planning niche. He is involved in the practical application of estate planning techniques, asset protection strategies and succession planning structures. He also cultivates and maintains enduring relationships with HNW and UHNW clients and colleagues through dedication, integrity, and commitment to excellence. He is a member of the Florida Bar, the Tennessee Bar, the US Tax Court, WealthCounsel and Tri-Cities Estate Planning Council.

"Chad is the ideal addition to our practice" says firm President William Andersen. "He is an exceptional attorney possessing outstanding legal skills and extraordinary relationships with his clients." ■



Celebrate Eastman's 100th Anniversary

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Eastman was born into a business climate not unlike today's, with world events causing upheaval in supply chains and markets. World War I and the Spanish Flu pandemic had interrupted George Eastman's European supply of Methanol and Acetone for Kodak, and he vowed to build his own domestic supply chain. That vow led him to Kingsport, with its abundance of natural resources and business-friendly climate.

Today, Eastman is a leader in the American business response to the pandemic, dealing with the issues at hand while never losing focus on the spirit of innovation.

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The U.S. vs China: COVID-19 could shape a new world order

by Marsha Blackburn (for a full white paper on US-China relations by Senator Blackburn, visit blackburn.senate.gov)

2019 was a significant year in U.S.-China relations, marking the fortieth anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations and the finalization of a Phase One Trade Deal—both positive steps in a relationship between great powers. But 2019 also marked seventy years since Mao Zedong’s ascendancy to the Chairmanship of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and thirty years since that same party massacred its own citizens on a clear June day in Tiananmen Square. In December 2019, it seemed inconceivable that 2020 would become an even more momentous year.

Since 1979, the United States has maintained a complex diplomatic relationship with China that has become increasingly fraught with conflict. In spite of these difficulties, many experts would argue that these relations have been beneficial; however, a close look at the history of U.S.-China relations shows that for every benefit gained, American companies, families, and every branch of the government became increasingly vulnerable to manipulation by Chinese interests.

From Outbreak to Pandemic

On December 31, 2019, government officials in Wuhan, China confirmed they were monitoring the spread of a pneumonia of unknown cause. Just days later, they confirmed the pneumonia was caused by a novel virus that had infected dozens of people. It wasn’t until January 23, 2020, however, that authorities shut off Wuhan from the rest of the country; they canceled all flights and trains leaving the city, and suspended public transportation services within. By that time, though, the virus had spread like wildfire throughout and beyond Asia, infecting people in Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the United States.

That 23-day gap alone would have proved crucial to stopping the spread of the disease; but credible watchdog reports revealed that officials in Hubei Province and in Beijing held back from global health officials for much longer. These advocates are unanimous in their allegations that the CCP knew for weeks that COVID-19 was spreading, that it was highly contagious and dangerous, and still chose to lie about it. The world would later discover that CCP officials waited 51 days before alerting the public to what had become a novel coronavirus epidemic.

This deception, executed in the name of controlling a narrative that has since spiraled, allowed a regional outbreak to morph into a global pandemic. As of July 20, 2020, the United States alone has lost more than 140,000 people to COVID-19, and over 3.7 million innocent American men, women, and children have suffered from the infection.

Ripple Effects

As the novel coronavirus spread beyond China’s borders, Western political forces drew their battle lines. Discussions in the media and on popular digital platforms were influenced by hyperpolitical public sentiment. In the background, however, government officials were moving quickly to assess public preparedness and map out potential security concerns. What they found confirmed more than two decades’ worth of whistleblowing on the part of experts

and legislators—that the United States’ entanglement with China had perpetuated a series of serious economic, health care delivery, diplomatic, and national security vulnerabilities.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the American economy are already catastrophic. In the month of July, the Department of Labor (DOL) reported that the nation’s unemployment rate rests at 11.1%. Mandatory lockdowns and the resulting economic slowdown destroyed millions of jobs. The Congressional Budget Office is predicting the national deficit will reach its highest level since World War II.

For many Americans, the first few months of 2020 came with the shock of shortages of common household goods, medications, and personal protective equipment (PPE). Supply chain hawks were quick to point out that, not only are America’s supply chains for these items vulnerable, many of them function at the mercy of Beijing. This lack of control, the American people discovered, had the potential to affect much more than the local supermarket’s supply of latex gloves. They learned that economically beneficial relationships between American companies and Beijing had shifted a power balance most assumed would always tilt in the U.S.’s favor, and created a perfect storm of risk and dependency.

The Tipping Point

As the effects of the pandemic escalated, so did tensions between warring political factions seeking to define what “pandemic-era policy” should look like. Efforts to frame positions critical of China as reactionary and xenophobic were overwhelmed by reports from doctors, journalists, and lawyers in China who had been intimidated by CCP officials into staying silent about the outbreak, and then imprisoned, tortured, or expelled from the country when they refused. Human rights advocates compared this uptick in political violence to tactics already in use by the CCP to silence dissent in Tibet, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in far western China, and in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Thusly the opaque lens through which most of the world views modern day China was exposed, if not yet acknowledged in mainstream culture. Propaganda can only do so much to disguise authoritarianism masquerading as capitalism, but for the time being, those ancient tactics remain effective at persuading the easily duped, even in the developed world. Buzzwords, however, do nothing to repair the utter brokenness of Beijing’s relationship with the West, particularly the United States.

Conclusion

Both the East and the West argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a global governance vacuum that can be filled either only by a democratic society, or only by an autocratic one. While U.S. COVID-19 response has been imperfect, Chinese missteps—both willful and otherwise—are demonstrative of the internal and external challenges precipitated by Beijing’s governance choices at home and abroad. In an era of Great Power Competition, a global crisis provides the nexus to shape a new world order.



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