



Executive of the Month: Multiple projects in Chenango County create economic growth for 2013; 20-year broadcast journalist reporting on business and economic issues in Southern Tier region

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Commerce Chenango was created in 2006, to redefine and formalize the longstanding relationship among the Chenango County Chamber of Commerce; local development efforts; and the County of Chenango Industrial Development Agency (CCIDA). Commerce Chenango emerged as the umbrella organization, while two existing local development corporations became one - the Development Chenango Corp. The salaries of Commerce Chenango's full-time staff of six are allocated across the various functions and projects of the three organizations, plus a small foundation that is associated with the Chamber. Commerce Chenango's president and chief executive officer is also the executive director of both Development Chenango Corp., and the CCIDA.

Since 2011, that position has been held by what many would view as an unlikely choice: Veteran broadcast journalist Steve Craig. "20 years of reporting on business and economic issues in New York's Southern Tier region apparently equipped me to give meaningful answers to the selection committee's questions," he said. "The ability to frame questions and quickly absorb information are the specific hold-over skills that have enabled my on-the-job training."

For strategic, operational, and technical work, Craig relies on Jennifer Tavares, the organization's credentialed director of economic development, and on recently-hired economic development coordinator Rebecca Sands, now engaged in training on multiple tracks. Sands was brought on board specifically to navigate the long and detailed process of achieving Foreign-Trade Zone (FTZ) status for Chenango County, which was granted, slightly ahead of schedule, in March. One major manufacturer is in now the process of activating an FTZ site that will allow significant cost savings when imported components are re-exported in finished products. Other sites can be activated as needed anywhere in Chenango County, a benefit Craig hopes will set Chenango County apart in the eyes of manufacturers looking to expand or relocate. "Even companies that put imported parts into products that eventually go on sale here in the US can manage their cash needs by utilizing a Foreign-Trade Zone," he said.

Another major effort aimed at attracting new industry to Chenango County is the CCIDA's ambitious rail revitalization project. "The north-south Utica Main Line through Chenango County has been unable to provide service since a major flood in 2006 washed out several sections of track," Craig recounted. Subsequent high-water events in 2011 made the erosion even worse. Since then, Commerce Chenango Economic Development has been able to use local and state funding sources to leverage a \$4.7 million grant from the federal Economic Development Administration. The result will be nearly \$6 million worth of repairs, upgrades, and preventive maintenance that is expected to

be complete by the end of the 2014 construction season. Craig expects the CCIDA's now-vacant 35-acre business park in North Norwich to be a prime beneficiary of renewed rail service. "A siding into the park would be easy to do, either as part of the main project or in tandem with it," he said. Just as he was settling into his new role, Craig was tapped by the Chenango County board of supervisors to be the county's representative on the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council, one of ten such councils formed in 2011 as part of governor Cuomo's economic development strategy. "Our region pioneered the creation of dedicated funds, targeted at community revitalization, rural initiatives, and shovel-ready sites," he explained. "These programs have turned out to be extremely responsive and flexible funding mechanisms for a wide range of projects." The Rural Initiative Fund has made low-interest loans available to several Chenango County businesses, including the fast-growing Sunrise Family Farms, a maker of organic and other specialty strained yogurts.

Meanwhile Community Revitalization loans have been critical in the financing mix for an ambitious historic hotel restoration project in Greene, and to rescue a once-doomed anchor retail property in downtown Norwich. "Chenango County is blessed with a constellation of historic downtown business districts," said Craig. "We intend to use every resource available to preserve the character of these areas, while also meeting the needs of 21st-century businesses."

To that end, Commerce Chenango Economic Development applied for and is implementing a Main Street Grant program in New Berlin, the closest business district to the booming Chobani yogurt plant. "A lot of people coming to the area specifically to visit the Chobani plant get their first impression of Chenango County from New Berlin," Craig said. "We want that to be the best impression possible." As many as eight commercial spaces and eight apartments are in line for renovations by the end of next summer.

All of this is a far cry from reporting the news on local television broadcasts, and Craig is often asked if he misses his former career. "Not at all," he insists. "I still get to do a lot of information gathering, and anyone who works for a non-profit or public authority knows there's plenty of reporting involved. But instead of disappearing into the air at the end of the day, the information guides decisions that can have real, positive impacts on our communities."