

Our Businesses

# An interesting journey over six months



**Michael Nicastro**  
Chamber  
Chatter

With the end of the first six months of my tenure with the Central Connecticut/Greater Bristol Chambers of Commerce in sight, I thought I'd take a moment to look back on the events and activities of my first six months. To say that these last six months have been interesting, would be a significant understatement, not in a negative way but in a very exciting and sometimes puzzling way.

From the chamber's perspective, we have had many very successful events through mid-year. Our annual Home Show was very well attended and planning for the 25th anniversary edition in 2010 is already under way. Special events such as the Economic Forecast Luncheon, Legislative Breakfast, Inter-Service Club dinner and Duck Race

were all very successful and many outpaced previous events in attendance numbers.

Rounding out the first six months was our Annual Dinner where we celebrated our 120th anniversary and unveiled some of the plans we have for the future. And of course we will wrap up the first six months with the State of the City/Towns on June 30, which includes every one of our six affiliate communities.

Operationally, we have restructured our team and launched our Long Range Strategic Planning Committee with a goal of developing a three-year rolling strategic plan that will focus on chamber growth, programs, products and the delivery of services to membership. In addition, we continue to develop our advocacy abilities for our membership so that they have a strong voice with local, state and federal leaders.

On the advocacy front, these first six months found chamber management in Washington DC for meetings with our Connecticut congressional and senate leaders. With a new administration in place and a clear change in philosophy, we found our federal contingent engaged in issues from healthcare to transportation, education to food safety and each of them increasing in power

and influence.

Back home, the state budget battle that started as soon as the legislative session began continues, and we face the real possibility of beginning a new fiscal year without a constitutionally required budget. Without question, the level of polarization on whether or not programs will be cut or taxes will be raised has every advocacy group staking out their "sacred cows" for protection. George Bernard Shaw said best, "A government which robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul."

In advocacy for our small and large businesses alike, the chamber worked very closely with our seven other Metro Chamber partners. Thus far, that teamwork has (for the time being) prevented the loss of key tax credits that drive growth and create the environment that generates jobs. It also has exposed legislation that would have unnecessarily added costs to both businesses and the state budget with very little benefit to very few state residents as a result.

On the economic development front, the chamber has met with a few serious and well-qualified developers showing initial interest in the city's center including the mall site as well as other pieces of property that surround the area. To further push for

growth we had the commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Transportation, Joseph Marie attend one our "Eggs & Issues" events to open a deeper dialogue on the reactivation of passenger rail service along the freight line now owned and operated by Pan Am rail. This continues to gain momentum with legislators from the chamber's region and many other surrounding communities now pushing to complete a study that would open the door to make passenger rail a reality once again.

As we head into the second half of the year, our efforts will focus almost exclusively on economic growth and development. This will be done by working with local entrepreneurs to launch new businesses and/or obtain sources of capital for those businesses. At the same time, this will increase chamber membership in a year where, despite the economic challenges, our membership has held steady.

Despite the capital markets beginning to show some signs of life, economic recovery on a local basis still will face some significant challenges. The chamber will remain committed to helping our members through these challenges by continuing to participate in the debates and discussions that affect them every

day.

### Chamber Notes

I've had a number of emails and calls asking when the chamber's public access television show will return to the Nutmeg TV lineup. We are in production now with our new production which will be known as "Connections." Connections will be a news magazine style format and will visit local businesses,

associations and community organizations throughout the six communities that form the Central Connecticut Chambers of Commerce. Look for the show to be back on the air in early August.

*Michael Nicastro is President & CEO of the Greater Bristol Chamber of Commerce. He can be reached at m.nicastro@bristol-chamber.org*

### Company offers cells to poor

WATERBURY- Tens of thousands of low-income Connecticut people could be getting free cell phone service from a Florida company.

TracFone Wireless of Miami, Fla., says it will provide the service for up to 260,000 poor families under a federally sponsored program.

The company has launched SafeLink Wireless

in Connecticut, offering a new Motorola phone and 64 minutes of airtime each month.

The cell phone service is available to people who receive government assistance through programs such as food stamps, Section 8 housing and Supplemental Security Income.

*Associated Press*

### Housing permits drop in state

HARTFORD - The state's economic development agency says the number of permits for new housing units has dropped again.

The state Department of Economic and Community Development says after going up for the first four months of the year, permits went down in May.

Figures show towns and cities issued just 192 permits for new housing units in May, the second-lowest total

for any month this year.

May's total was 43 percent fewer than the 339 units authorized in April and 61 percent fewer than 493 units approved in May 2008.

Through the first five months of 2009, just 1,031 housing units have been authorized, 47 percent less than 1,947 approved at the same point in 2008.

*Associated Press*

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