

Chambers Partner to Strengthen Economic Presence

BY LYNN HARMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WESTERN SUSSEX CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

» At a recent joint meeting of both Board of Directors, the Laurel and Western Sussex Chambers of Commerce voted and agreed to form one regional chamber of commerce for Western Sussex County. The organizations decided to move forward with the plan to become one chamber, in a collaborative and dedicated effort to support business economic development along the Route 13/Sussex Highway corridor, along with the promotion of visitor traffic and tourism dollars to funnel from the eastern part of the county to Western Sussex County.

The current Western Sussex Chamber of Commerce (formerly the Greater Seaford Chamber of Commerce) moved to the Route 13 location and changed its name in January 2018 to better represent the towns of Greenwood, Bridgeville and Blades, and the City of Seaford with the support of its membership. In 1954 the Seaford Chamber was chartered by a group of local businessmen, and then later in 1975, the membership decided to amend their charter to incorporate the towns of Blades, Bridgeville and Greenwood in their service area. It has been serving the business community for over 65 years, acting as the primary advocate, voice and resource for business organizations in the community. The Laurel Chamber was founded in 1917 and has been serving the Laurel community for over 100 years to advance the economic development of Laurel by promoting civic, industrial, commercial, agribusiness and social interests in the community.

WSSC President Mike McClure shared, "Gone are the days of the Laurel-Seaford rivalry. We look forward to working together as one chamber to better serve all of our members in Western Sussex County."

It wasn't until mid-2017, after the State Legislature began considering taking back state tourism dollars that had been disbursed to local chambers to promote local tourism programs and activities, discussions began between the two



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organizations to consider becoming one regional chamber to pool their resources under one administration. The State Legislature did vote, after a collaborative advocacy effort by local tourism offices and chambers, to keep the state accommodation tax formula to remain intact with 1% to continue to be distributed to local visitor bureaus, and in the case of Sussex County a portion also disbursed to local chambers to promote their local events and tourism efforts.

Although funding resources maintained for both organizations, it has become apparent that a partnership of the two chambers will create a stronger, vibrant and engaged membership working together toward a common goal of fostering enhanced economic development

and tourism for Western Sussex County.

Both Chambers have had an ongoing collaboration of working together along with their business members, as well as other organizations and local groups, to promote and support economic development and tourism for Western Sussex County. In the last four years the two organizations pulled their tourism resources and began hosting travel writers from all over to share the charm and the pristine beauty that Western Sussex County has to offer. Over two dozen articles, blogs and tv segments have resulted, thus supporting the fact that for every \$1.00 allocated from state accommodation taxes and re-distributed to local tourism efforts, yields \$2.75 in State revenue, supporting almost 42,000 jobs statewide and boosting economic development. Executive Director, Lynn Harman acknowledged, "We have already seen an increase year after year in our overnight stay packages at our local hotels, and we have also witnessed several new small businesses and restaurants open in our towns. There is definitely room for more, and I am excited for our organization to support that growth!"

Board members and staff of both organizations are currently working together to develop a new board of directors, slate of officers, strategic plan and administrative documents. The new organization plans to have a formal kick-off celebration for its combined membership in early-December at the Chambers' annual Holiday Social and roll out as the Western Sussex Chamber of Commerce, serving from Laurel to Greenwood, on January 1, 2019.