

Staying Open for Business

By Charles O'Neill

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It is less than two weeks to the biggest, busiest day in Harbor Springs. The Fourth of July means a parade, fireworks, people and plenty of business in town. Reading a recent message to its members from Harbor Springs Chamber of Commerce board president Jody Ewbank might give Fourth fans a bit of pause however, given that the Chamber has been overseer of said holiday events for many years.

"...As a Board, it is now imperative that we face and address existing problems within the administrative structure of our organization. As President of this organization, I offer you my personal guarantee that these issues are in process of being addressed and positive change lies ahead.

"I ask for your support during the next few months as we work together to bring the Chamber to a new level of efficiency and productivity. The Harbor Springs Area Chamber of Commerce should be a valuable and successful resource for your business or organization and I speak for the Board when I say that our new and primary goal is to assure both of those ideals for you, our members."

That message was sent out to member businesses last week following the resignation of the Chamber's "membership and marketing director" Teresa Chaney, announced as a new hire only a few months ago. That follows on the heels of the departure of "executive director" Kathy Lott last year.

Chamber of Commerce members pay annual dues to remain a part of the Chamber. The Chamber hosts fundraising events including a golf event, "Taste of Harbor," "Harbor Heroes" and others throughout the year. They solicit donations to pay for the Fourth of July fireworks. They are, in a sense, a major holiday planner and fundraiser for events many take for granted.

Yet, when you go to the Chamber website lately, events are out of date. Listings are from last year. And yes, the fireworks last year were a bust because of fog, hardly the fault of the Chamber, but apparently blamed on them anyway.

This is probably not a pleasant time to be Harbor Springs Chamber of Commerce board president. But Jody Ewbank remains positive in her outlook and push for future improvements. In a telephone interview Monday morning from her post as manager at Stafford's Pier Restaurant, Ewbank refused to give into any negative thoughts. Tentative at first, she brought out the bulldog of positive feedback most Chamber presidents tend to offer in challenging times.

When asked about the lack of full-time, paid director to oversee the Fourth, and whether the parade would take place this year, Ewbank was quick to interrupt.

"Let me stop you there. Theresa (Chaney) has agreed to work through the Fourth and for that we are thankful," Ewbank said.

"Not only that, Gregg Garver (First Community Bank president) is our board member in charge of the parade and he has told me that they have never had any problem getting volunteers to help with the staging. Things are going fine for the Fourth."

Garver concurred.

"Historically we have had no problems getting volunteers to help with the parade. I did have two volunteers move away, so I am looking for a couple of replacements."

Anyone interested in helping with parade should contact Garver at 526-2114.

The parade down Main Street kicks off at 1 pm on Friday, July 4.

And what about the fireworks?

"We are actually ahead of last year in terms of fundraising and most of the money traditionally comes in during this next week in the run-up to the Fourth. So we are doing okay there as well," Ewbank said.

She added that this year's show will be expanded due to the fogged in show last year.

To donate to the fireworks fund, contact the Chamber at 231-526-7999.

Membership in the Harbor Springs Chamber of Commerce stands at 417, Ewbank said, a level that has been fairly consistent over the past few years.

"We really want our membership to get involved," Ewbank said. "They need to understand they can impact our decision-making process as a board."

Getting members involved in the Chamber is a key component of the director's job, Ewbank said.

"The administrative position job is difficult," Ewbank said. "There is a lot of coming and going in that office, a lot of telephone calls, mailings, and other responsibilities."

One of the ways the Chamber is working to become more efficient is through a new website, set to come on line soon. Since the new site is about to go live, Ewbank admitted the current site has not been getting much attention.

"We are about two weeks away from launching the new site with all fresh information," she said.

"The new site will be database driven which will allow for us to better collect and respond to information and requests," Ewbank said. "It should cut down on our telephone calls and the amount of money we spend sending visitor packages through the mail.

"We also need to encourage our members to make sure all the information we have is up-to-date. Members will be able to update information on the website using passwords," she added.

"In order to make the administration of the Chamber run more efficiently, we just have to start thinking outside of the box, thinking in this century," Ewbank said.

One example of such thinking, she said, came when one of the Chamber's Ambassador committee members, the director of the senior living center Hillside Apartments, suggested using some of the resident there to help with mailings and stuffing envelopes.

"It has been a huge help to us," Ewbank said.

The Chamber has set up a search and hire committee for a new director. No advertising has been placed yet, Ewbank said.