

ELK RAPIDS NEWS

October 15
2020

Volume XV
Issue No. 21
75¢



Photo by Barb Mosher

Checking in with the chamber

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When the Coronavirus pandemic shut down many area businesses this past winter and spring, the Elk Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce sprang into overdrive to support them, even though its own operations and revenue streams were significantly impacted as well.

More than half of the Chamber's income is generated by the summer events it produces — arts and crafts shows, Evenings on River Street, and the community awards dinner — and its annual visitors' guide. With those erased from its 2020 lineup, plus the scaling back of the visitors' guide, the organization's roughly \$200,000 annual budget suffered a huge hit.

Although Chamber Executive Director Tom Kern and his part-time staff of Maryl Kohl (events and marketing) and Laura Savoie (membership) were furloughed at various times, they continued to actively assist their members as best they could despite their own pandemic-induced challenges and limitations.

"During the beginning of the pandemic, we all volunteered our time and worked harder than ever, because it was important for us to be there," Kern said.

The Chamber became a crucial information portal, emailing newsletters daily, then twice a week, and eventually weekly to its 2,200-recipient mailing list to keep businesses, organizations, and residents up to date on frequently changing government orders, restrictions, guidelines, assistance and loan programs, and other resources as well as the status of various businesses and modifications to their services and hours of operation.

"We connected people and businesses with state legislators and the governor's office and the Michigan and U.S. Chambers of Commerce and Traverse Connect," Kern said. "We worked hard to answer every question or concern anyone had as the pandemic evolved, how to stay in compliance and understand templates for re-opening."

As winter merged into spring, and spring into summer, Kern was inspired by the tenacity and perseverance of business owners and community leaders. "I've been really encouraged by their willingness to try," he said. "Overall, people have figured out how to make it work in the middle of something no one could have been prepared for. There's an old saying, 'Nothing breeds creativity like a crisis,' and obviously we've had one. So people got creative and innovative, because they couldn't do business as usual."

Whether it was constructing take-out windows to serve customers directly on the sidewalk, or expanding outside dining areas, or introducing delivery and curbside pick-up options, restaurants and retailers strove to get their products into the eager hands of customers.

But has it been enough to carry them through? Kern says his sense is that most businesses "have done ok, but not great." His bigger concern, however, is their long-term viability.

"They've has gotten through the summer and survived, but the real question is can they survive 2021?" he mused.



The Elk Rapids Chamber of Commerce. Photo by Barb Mosher

"How will the impact of what's happened be felt this coming winter and spring? We're having conversations with the Downtown Development Authority and the village about what we can do as a community to help support the capacity of existing businesses to withstand 2021, whatever that will look like."

In addition to assisting in the expansion and growth of the Elk Rapids area business community, Kern and his staff are charged with managing the Chamber's US-31 visitor center and working to attract visitors to the region. The novel coronavirus pandemic has also stymied much of that objective.

While the Chamber usually relies on a network of volunteers to staff the visitors center and support its tourism promotion endeavors, Kern didn't think it wise to ask the typically senior-citizen-aged helpers to potentially expose themselves to the Covid-19 virus. So, the decision was made to close the center until it's deemed safe to reopen.

"We don't have the staffing capacity to be open without volunteers, and we're not comfortable with that yet," Kern said. "This time of year, and through the winter, it's sporadically used anyway. In all likelihood, we're looking at next spring for opening the visitors center."

Kern says the economic impact of temporarily shuttered businesses and the loss of events that bring people to the village and the obstacles to promoting tourism is difficult to quantify.

"When people are downtown for an Evening on River Street, they eat in the restaurants and stick their noses in stores and look around," he explained. "The same is true with arts and crafts shows. People stroll up to the downtown."

But Elk Rapids is unique among northern Michigan towns, Kern added, and that can make all the difference to its viability.

"From the feedback we get, Elk Rapids has the nicest beach and park on East Bay," he said. "Boaters tell us we have probably the finest harbor marina on the Great Lakes. We

have a quaint, walkable downtown with more businesses on the other side (of US-31). All that makes Elk Rapids a little different from other small towns. People seem to really enjoy it here."

Moving forward, Kern named three priorities he and his staff consider essential for the economic health of the area: continuing to provide the information businesses need related to operating in the midst of a pandemic; continuing to support and grow the existing business base by providing essential infrastructure including fiber optic technology; and working with the village and the DDA to plan for the construction of affordable housing.

A fourth issue critical to the overall well-being of the area, Kern says, is a solid school system. "It's absolutely essential," he said. "Strong schools are one of our greatest assets, but there are needs that have been articulated by both the superintendent who just left and the new one. We can't continue to have a world-class educational system if we don't put the structures in place. That's why the Chamber Board supports the upcoming bond proposal."

In spite of the many challenges that remain, Kern has high hopes for the community. "More than anything, I want to encourage people to be patient and understanding of each other," he said. "The pandemic has put a lot of stress on people, and we might have different opinions on various issues, but we can focus on what we agree on, and agree to disagree respectfully when we don't."

Although the Chamber doors may be locked, Kern and his staff are eager to serve. Visit elkrapidschamber.org, call them at 231-264-8202, or email them directly at info@elkrapidschamber.org. An assortment of brochures and other area information is also available outside the Chamber's front door at 305 US-31 North.

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