February 2026 Community Relations Update

As we navigate what has been a challenging winter across Greater Cape Ann, the Chamber remains focused on supporting our communities through connection and collaboration. This season has also brought moments that remind us of the risks inherent to life and work on the water, including the recent loss of the *F/V Lily Jean* off Cape Ann. We hold the families and the fishing community in our thoughts as we continue the work of bringing people together around the conversations and decisions that shape our region's future.

In advance of the upcoming special election for the Massachusetts House of Representatives, 5th Essex District, the Chamber is planning a Candidate Forum that will bring together the final candidates following the primary. This forum will provide an opportunity for voters, businesses, and community members to hear directly from the candidates and better understand their perspectives on issues affecting our region. More details will be shared as plans are finalized.

The Chamber's Annual Economic Outlook Breakfast is scheduled for Thursday March 19 and will once again convene business, government, and community leaders from Greater Cape Ann and surrounding communities. This important annual event will focus on the local economy, featuring expert insight that translates macroeconomic and regional data into meaningful context for Main Street businesses, helping bridge the gap between national headlines and local realities. Registration is available on our event page with more details to come on the featured panelists.

In Essex, the Chamber is partnering with the Town to plan a Downtown Visioning Forum next month. This collaborative effort will invite residents and the local business community to share feedback and ideas to help shape the future of the downtown area. Specific details and opportunities to participate will be announced soon.

Across the region, municipalities are preparing for Spring Town Meetings, with detailed warrants addressing annual budgets and key policy updates, including zoning changes. Town Meeting dates are set for Rockport on April 11, Manchester on April 27, Essex on May 4, and Ipswich on May 12. In Manchester, the town is solidifying plans to recruit a new Police Chief as Chief Todd Fitzgerald announced his retirement effective June 30, 2026. The Planning Board is drafting updated bylaws for consideration at Town Meeting. These include the creation of two new zoning districts—Town Center and Harbor's Edge—designed to support mixed-use development while preserving commercial activity and community character. Additional public engagement will be scheduled to inform and gather feedback from the community prior to the town meeting.

In Essex, the Town is working with the state on a LEAP grant to secure technical assistance funding this spring to address flooding challenges along the Causeway. Crews are also relocating a gas line along Old Essex Road; the road will then be permanently closed to support marsh restoration for the Castle Neck River. In Ipswich, town and state officials have formed a Shellfishing Task Force to evaluate any available options to reopen clam flats and support the clamming community. The town is also reviewing its strategic plan and prioritizing major infrastructure projects.

In Gloucester, Applied Materials entered into an early termination agreement with the City to decommission the wind turbines on Dory Road. They have agreed to pay $587,000 to compensate for the estimated benefit of the turbines projected use. Additionally, the Zoning Board of Appeals granted a special permit for a mixed-use development with 40 residential units at 150 Main Street, the long vacant Santander Bank location. Additional permitting is still required before the project can officially move forward. In Rockport, the Select Board approved a statement of interest to the MA Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities seeking consideration for Seasonal Community Status designation, which would allow the reinstatement of a six-month minimum lease term for accessory dwelling units, among other provisions. This status would still need voter approval at Town Meeting.

As these initiatives move forward, the Chamber remains committed to staying informed, fostering dialogue, and serving as a connector between businesses, residents, and local leadership. We will continue to share updates and opportunities for engagement as decisions are made and plans take shape across our communities.

As always feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Colleen Murdock
Director of Community Relations
Greater Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce
colleen@capeannchamber.com