March 2026 Community Relations Update

One of the Chamber's core priorities is keeping the business community informed about what is happening at the municipal level across all 5 of our communities and identifying ways we can work together to advance shared priorities. Through regular attendance at municipal meetings, direct outreach and communication with city and town officials, and quarterly division meetings, we aim to strengthen collaboration, elevate business voices, and promote thoughtful civic engagement throughout Greater Cape Ann.

Our upcoming division meetings provide an important opportunity to stay engaged. We encourage businesses to attend and lend their voices to these conversations:

- Essex: Downtown Visioning Forum - Tuesday, March 24, 6:30–8:00 PM at Essex Town Hall.
- Ipswich: Division Meeting - Friday, March 27, 8:00–9:00 AM at Ipswich Town Hall.
- Manchester-by-the-Sea: Division Meeting - Tuesday, March 24, 8:30–9:30 AM at the Manchester American Legion
- Rockport: Division Meeting - Monday, March 30, 5:30–6:30 PM at the Rockport Police Department.

As part of our commitment to informed civic participation, we are also hosting a Candidate Forum for the Massachusetts House 5th Essex District Special Election on Friday, March 20 from 6:00–7:00 PM at Manchester Essex Regional Middle High School. All candidates advancing beyond Tuesday's primary have been invited to participate. The forum will be moderated by Rockport attorney Robert Visnick and recorded by 1623 Studios. The event is free and open to the public, and we encourage members of the business community to attend and engage in this important local discussion.

Beyond advocacy and engagement, we continue to support the business community through informative programming. This year's annual Economic Outlook Breakfast, From Data to Decisions, will analyze key economic indicators and translate them into practical, real-world guidance for local businesses—bridging the gap between headline economics and Main Street reality. Registration is open for the March 19th event on our website; space is limited so we encourage people to purchase tickets early. We are also continuing our Small Business Seminar Series, designed to provide expert insights from fellow Chamber members offering valuable tools, tips, and resources to help businesses navigate daily challenges and strengthen operations. Upcoming seminars include AI for Small Business and Strategic Leadership, with additional topics to follow. Recordings of previous seminars are available under Chamber Resources on our website, and all upcoming programing can be found on our Events Calendar.

In Essex, this quarter's aforementioned division meeting will focus specifically on the future of downtown. In partnership with town officials, we are hosting a public forum to gather input from business owners and residents to help identify opportunities to promote a vibrant downtown, frame priorities around business needs, and co-create community-supported solutions. The town will also see a contested race for the open Board of Selectmen seat, with incumbent and current chair Alva Ingaharro pulling papers alongside challenger Dextor Viator of the Woodman's family.

In Ipswich, town officials are grappling with an $800,000 budget deficit while also working to address several major infrastructure projects. Among them is determining how to move forward with improvements to the Central and South Main Street intersection after the state and federally funded TIP Program was formally rejected. Budget constraints and infrastructure planning will continue to shape discussions in the months ahead as the town evaluates its strategic planning.

In Gloucester, the City's new administration has been navigating several key vacancies. The police chief formally retired as of February 28 after extending his departure to assist with the transition; Assistant Chief Michael Williams has been acting Chief while a search for his replacement ensues. The Mayor has also announced the hiring of Kelly Dolan as Chief Administrative Officer and Sophia Gross as Director of Communications and Constituent Services. The city also received a $50,000 grant to hire an economic development consultant to review development options for Lot I4C2 at 65 Rogers Street. Because the parcel is located within a Designated Port Area, any redevelopment plans will need to comply with state guidelines governing those zones.

In Rockport, two Select Board seats will be on the ballot this election season, with incumbents Paul Murphy (chair) and Ross Brackett both pulling papers to seek reelection. Meanwhile, like many municipalities facing rising costs, Manchester-by-the-Sea is exploring ways to manage expenditures. The Select Board recently approved retaining a second law firm, Pierce Davis & Perritano, to supplement services currently provided by KP Law, at a rate of $50 less per hour, in an effort to control legal costs while maintaining service levels.

Finally, it has been a challenging winter, with snowfall totals we haven't seen in several years. Slower foot traffic and seasonal dips can put added pressure on local businesses. We encourage everyone to make a conscious effort to shop local, dine local, and support our small businesses during this time. If there are municipal issues affecting your business, we welcome your outreach. Our advocacy is strongest when it reflects the real-time needs and priorities of our members.

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

Sincerely,

Colleen Murdock
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