July 2026 Community Relations Update

Summer is officially in full swing, and while our communities are welcoming visitors, hosting events, and supporting local businesses through one of the busiest times of the year, the Chamber continues to monitor and engage on the municipal and state issues that impact our business community. From workforce development and tourism initiatives to local infrastructure projects, business advocacy, and regulatory changes, we've remained actively involved in conversations that help strengthen Greater Cape Ann's economy.

One of the highlights this month was the launch of our Business Education Collaborative's Interview Skills Workshop at Gloucester High School. Members of the collaborative presented practical interview techniques, professional etiquette, and common interview mistakes through interactive role-playing exercises designed to better prepare students for entering the workforce. The workshop was well received by students and faculty alike, and we look forward to expanding this initiative while continuing to strengthen connections between our business community and local schools.

Transportation and parking continue to be important topics in Gloucester as the Chamber participated in a City focus group to provide business feedback on the existing seasonal Stage Fort Park Shuttle service. The shuttle has historically experienced low ridership, and the City has retained consultants to evaluate strategies for increasing utilization and expanding awareness of the service. The goal is to encourage more visitors to park outside of downtown, reduce parking congestion, and make it easier for residents and tourists to explore local businesses. The Chamber provided input on how the shuttle could better serve visitors while supporting downtown merchants.

Our quarterly Chamber Division meetings continue to provide valuable opportunities for communication between local businesses and municipal leadership. In Manchester-by-the-Sea, the Chamber helped facilitate discussions regarding how infrastructure projects are communicated to businesses that may be impacted by construction, with an emphasis on improving advance notice and coordination. In Ipswich, we were pleased to introduce the Town's new Town Manager, Brendan Sweeney, to members of the local business community while discussing opportunities for collaboration and ideas for upcoming events that support local businesses. Upcoming Division meetings are scheduled for Rockport on July 27, Essex on August 3, and Gloucester later this summer.

Our Small Business University series concluded with an informative session covering Massachusetts payroll, human resources, and employment compliance. Recordings of this seminar, along with previous sessions in the series, are available on the Chamber website for members who were unable to attend or would like to revisit the material. Planning is already underway for a new lineup of educational programs that will resume this fall with additional topics designed to help local businesses succeed.

Tourism continues to be one of Greater Cape Ann's strongest economic drivers. Chamber Board members and staff attended the North Shore Alliance Policy Makers Series featuring Kate Fox, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, who shared updates on statewide tourism initiatives and the findings of the Commonwealth's 2024–2025 visitor survey. The survey found that a majority of North of Boston visitors are adults traveling without children who are primarily drawn to arts, culture, history, and authentic local experiences. Those findings reinforce the tremendous value of Greater Cape Ann's museums, galleries, historic sites, festivals, performing arts organizations, and

waterfront attractions, while underscoring the importance of continued collaboration among local and regional tourism organizations to promote these assets.

Supporting local businesses remains at the core of the Chamber's mission. During the past month, we celebrated several ribbon cuttings recognizing new businesses, grand re-openings, and significant renovations throughout the region. These events not only celebrate the investments our members are making in their businesses and the impact they have on our community but also reaffirm the Chamber's commitment to highlighting local businesses and helping them build stronger connections.

The Chamber also participated in a webinar focused on ADA website accessibility, an issue becoming increasingly important for businesses of every size. Across the country, small businesses continue to face lawsuits alleging their websites do not adequately meet accessibility standards for individuals with visual or hearing impairments, despite regulatory requirements that continue to evolve and remain somewhat ambiguous. Businesses are encouraged to proactively evaluate their websites to improve accessibility where possible to help reduce legal risk while providing a better online experience for all users.

Business advocacy remained a significant focus this month. The Chamber helped facilitate communication between downtown businesses and the Town of Rockport regarding enforcement of the Town's outdoor display policy, ensuring business concerns were heard as the policy was renewed for the season. We also advocated on behalf of local liquor retailers regarding a proposed prohibition on the sale of miniature liquor bottles, commonly known as "nips", in Gloucester. Our goal is to encourage policymakers to carefully consider the economic impacts on small businesses while exploring alternative approaches to addressing litter concerns.

At the state level, the Legislature's Special Commission held a public hearing to review potential reforms to credit card fees charged to merchants. Swipe fees have reportedly increased approximately 80 percent since the pandemic, reaching an estimated $195 billion nationwide in 2025. The Commission is examining several possible approaches before issuing recommendations by December 2026. Among the options being discussed are proposals similar to those pursued in Illinois and Colorado that would exempt sales tax and gratuities from interchange fees, although those efforts continue to face legal challenges and implementation concerns.

Several municipal developments also remain on the Chamber's radar. In Gloucester, the City Council voted to extend parking on Pleasant Street in front of the Cape Ann Museum from two hours to four hours, with the goal of encouraging museum visitors to spend more time patronizing downtown businesses. The City will now update parking kiosk software and establish a new parking zone to implement the change. The Gloucester Licensing Board also approved extending last call until 1:30 a.m. through July 31 as part of the Commonwealth's seasonal extended-hours program.

In Ipswich, following the defeat of funding for a new public safety building at this spring's Town Meeting, the Town has scheduled a Special Town Meeting on September 8 followed by a Special Election on September 22 to allow residents to reconsider the proposal. Town officials also hosted a legislative meeting with members of the state delegation and representatives from the Division of Marine Fisheries to discuss the recent shellfish bed closures caused by a sewer system failure and the significant economic impacts those closures have had on local shell fishermen and related businesses.

In Manchester-by-the-Sea, the Town finalized a new curbside collection contract with Casella following lengthy negotiations that were slowed in part by the community's smaller size. The new contract transitions residents to an automated collection system utilizing standardized receptacles. Due to the timing of the agreement and implementation schedule, there will be no curbside collections during the week of July 6 and potentially longer as the new program is put into place.

The Chamber will continue monitoring these and other developments while advocating for policies that support a strong business climate and the continued success of Greater Cape Ann's business community.

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

Sincerely,

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