

The Derrick. and The News-Herald • 2026

BUSINESS

Review & Forecast

Friday, Feb. 13, 2026

Section B — Franklin / Sugarcreek Borough

Section

B



A road closure and detour sign in Franklin in March marked the start of preliminary work by Mortimer's Excavating on the city's A-108 sewer project, which stretched throughout the construction season and continues this year. Here, Matt Lockwood, of Mortimer's, uses a pressure washer and vac truck to dislodge dirt around utility lines. See the story on Page B2.

Section B of the Business Review and Forecast looks at businesses, both big and small, that comprise Franklin and Sugarcreek.

The section features a story on two major infrastructure projects that were a topic of discussion throughout 2025 as a result of traffic woes.

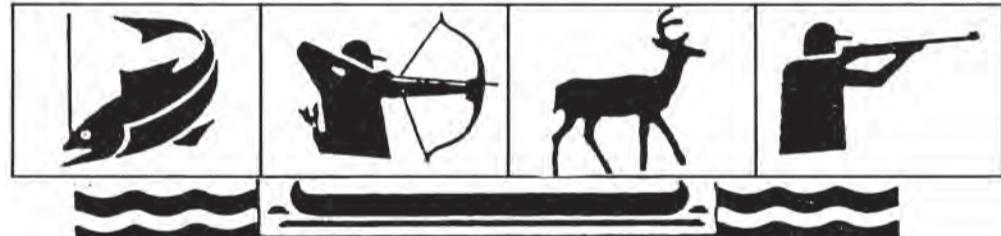
The Allegheny Boulevard and Front Street water-line replacement project replaced an aging major water line along Allegheny Boulevard in Franklin and Sugarcreek, and along Front Street in the borough.

Franklin's A-108 project is designed to remediate sewage overflow into French Creek during heavy rainfall, and that project has continued into 2026.

In business, Conair in 2025 positioned itself for long-term growth. At Shaw Industries and Welding Technologies, the company underwent leadership transition, while continuing to invest in skilled trades.

In addition, the Franklin Retail and Business Association plans to expand its schedule of public events.

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Franklin hit the road(s) with infrastructure projects

BY HELEN FIELDING

Staff writer

Road work was one of the most prominently visible activities in Franklin during 2025, as two major infrastructure projects wended their way through the city and its environs and caused considerable traffic disruption.

The Allegheny Boulevard and Front Street water-line replacement project replaced an aging major water line along Allegheny Boulevard in Franklin and Sugarcreek Borough, and along Front Street in Sugarcreek Borough. Both lines are connected to the city's water system. That project was materially completed in 2025, and came in under budget.

The other major infrastructure project, the A-108 sewer replacement project, is ongoing, and engineers said in December that the time frame would likely have to be extended beyond its original projected completion in late 2026.

The A-108 project, separating the storm and sanitary sewers in parts of the city, was Franklin's response to a mandate from the state Department of Environmental Protection to remediate sewage overflow into French Creek during heavy rains.

The project caused a number of traffic snarls during the summer, and several small sections of road have been closed over the course of the construction season as crews moved along the sewer lines.

Looking ahead to 2026, the city will likely see more traffic woes as the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's Liberty Street Betterment Project begins major updates to Liberty Street and its intersections, as well as portions of 15th Street and Eighth Street, which are all state roads.

Among the proposed changes will be the reduction of the four lanes in the downtown area to two lanes, one each way, with bike lanes on the sides of the road. Some left-turn arrows and upgraded signal timing are also on deck for the project.

Skill games tax and other ordinances

In December, the culmination of almost a year's worth of consideration came when Franklin City Council approved an ordinance imposing a \$300-per-machine tax on mechanical amusement devices, commonly known as skill games, in the city.

There was some debate on whether to include nonprofit organizations and service clubs in the tax, but ultimately council opted to exempt them because of the large amounts of money nonprofits donate to the community, including city events.

While not an ordinance passed in 2025, a good deal of community support was expressed at the October council meeting for the idea of passing an ordinance limiting the number of vape shops within the city.

Council member Christian Marshall spoke in September of the ordinance that had been passed by Ross Township in Allegheny County. The following month, several residents attended the meeting and some spoke, expressing support for the idea.

Also in September, council gave final approval to an ordinance that changed the zoning of several parcels along Eighth Street from residential to commercial to allow for the future construction of a restaurant at the old Gulf gas station next to the Eighth Street bridge.

Multiple parcels needed to be rezoned to avoid spot-zoning, which the city is not allowed to do, but the city's zoning officer and solicitor said residential dwellings in the rezoned area would be grandfathered in and could still be sold as residential structures.

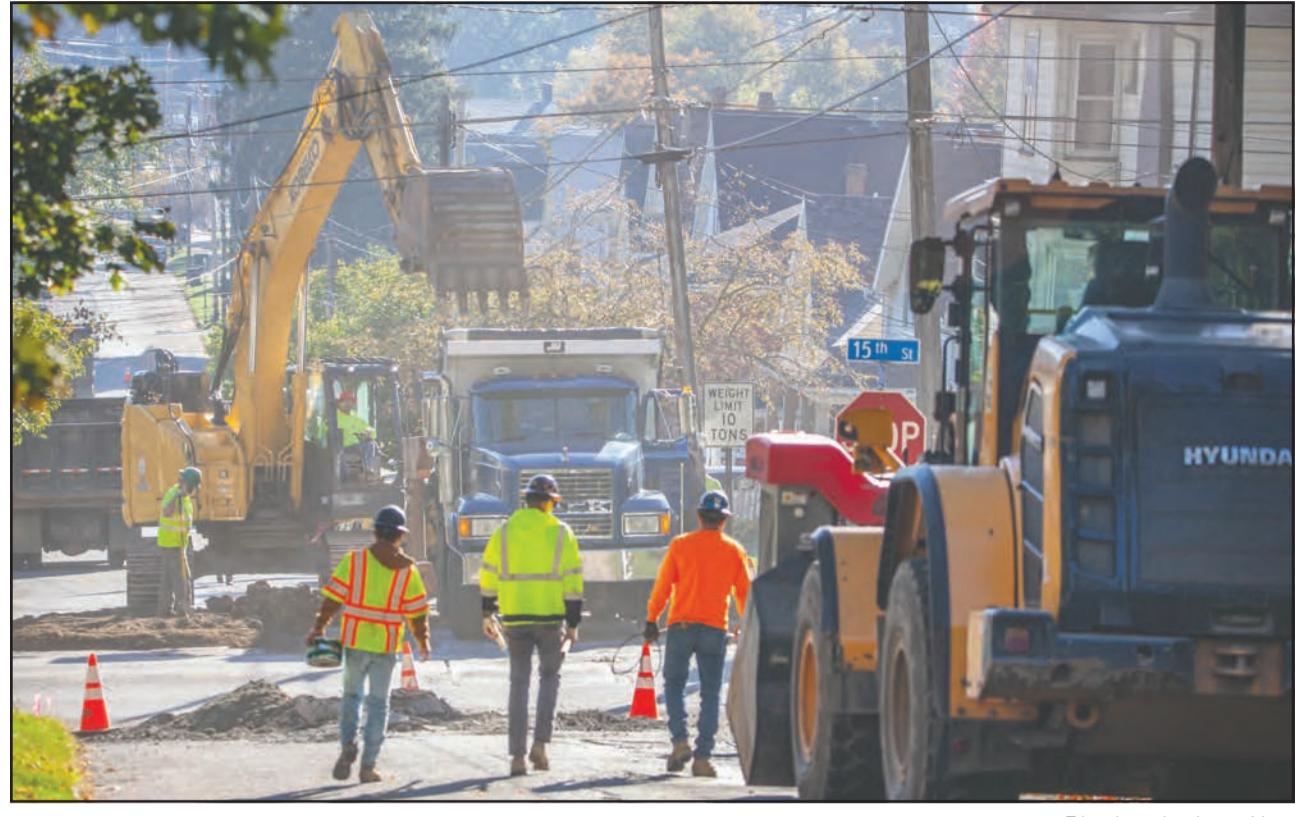
And early in the year, the city approved updates to its sidewalk cafe ordinance to allow sidewalk cafes at any time of the year, rather than only during the warmer months.

Fire trucks

A large expense for the city in 2025 was the emergency purchase of two fire trucks after a crack was found in the frame of the city's newest fire engine.

Though council initially approved an emergency expenditure of funds to fix the frame on the 17-year-old truck, the following month the panel rescinded the approval and opted to purchase a new demonstration fire engine at the advice of Fire Chief Andrew Eckel, who said the cost of repairing the old truck was greater than the truck's value.

While not fully fitted-out in the same way as a made-to-order truck, the demonstration truck would cost less and be available sooner, Eckel said. It could also be partially outfitted with equipment the fire department already has on hand.



File photo by Jamie Hunt

Workers from Mortimer Excavating head down Buffalo Street toward 15th Street in October as sewage line construction for Franklin's A-108 sewer project continued.

Additionally, council purchased a second-hand truck from Cherrytree Volunteer Fire Department in the amount of \$10,000 to help the city in the interim before the demo truck was received.

Prior to this at the end of 2024, the city had approved a custom Pierce fire engine in the amount of about \$1.27 million, but the truck will not be received for a few more years as the construction time frame was four years.

In December, Community Ambulance Service made a \$60,000 donation to the Franklin Fire Department, to be repeated over the following three years for a total of \$240,000, to help the city pay for its new fire trucks.

The city also approved a municipal lease in July to help pay for the emergency purchase of the demonstration engine.

Other matters

The city raised taxes by 1 mill in November, citing rising maintenance and operating costs and declining property tax revenue on the heels of some major commercial reassessments.

In May, Franklin City Hall reopened to the public after the completion of extensive renovations, including the HVAC and lighting

systems and improvements to the police department. The renovations had started in 2024.

After popular feedback, the city also permanently moved the polling place for its second voting precinct to the Knights of Columbus after the location was temporarily moved there from City Hall during renovations.

Council did decide on a use for its 2026 allocation of Community Development Block Grant funds, agreeing to use them to fund playground improvements at the Atlantic Avenue playground.

Council also voted to transfer projects for the 2021 and 2022 CDBG allocations, which had been allocated for street paving but were transferred because the ongoing A-108 project interfered.

Those funds were also used for playground upgrades, this time for the replacement of playground equipment at the 11th Street Playground. The playground equipment replacement was completed at the end of the year.

Additional 2021 CDBG funds were moved to a one-time food distribution program at the end of 2025, after the federal government shutdown led to suspension of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP) for a time.

During the year, council discussed questions such as homeless encampments, speeding and the clearing of snow from the Washington Crossing bridge, as well as rules for gatherings of more than 25 people in the city after Franklin police asked a "No Kings" rally to break up due to its failing to acquire the correct permits.

Council approved allowing the Franklin Area Chamber of Commerce to collect parking fees in city parking lots during Applefest, an idea originally suggested as a fundraiser for nonprofits, but which council later approved to be done by the chamber.

Franklin established a formal Right-to-Know policy in March after City Manager Jim Wetzel said it was discovered the city did not have a formal policy in place.

And Franklin took on The EADS Group as the official city engineer, after a period of a few years in which the position of city engineer stood vacant. The firm has worked with the city and General Authority on many projects in recent years.

HELEN FIELDING, reporter for The Derrick and The News-Herald, can be reached at helenfielding.thederrick@gmail.com or 814-677-8374.

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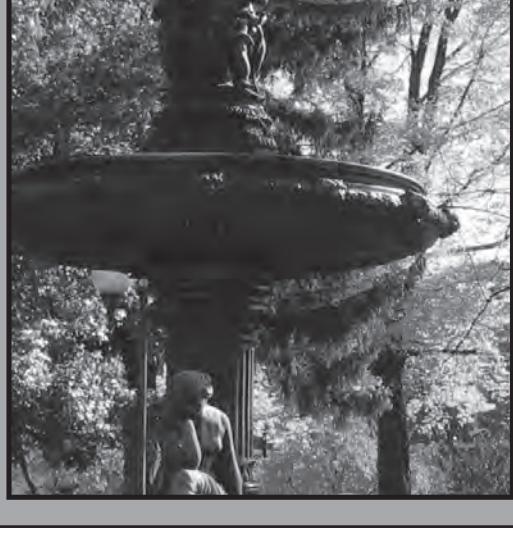
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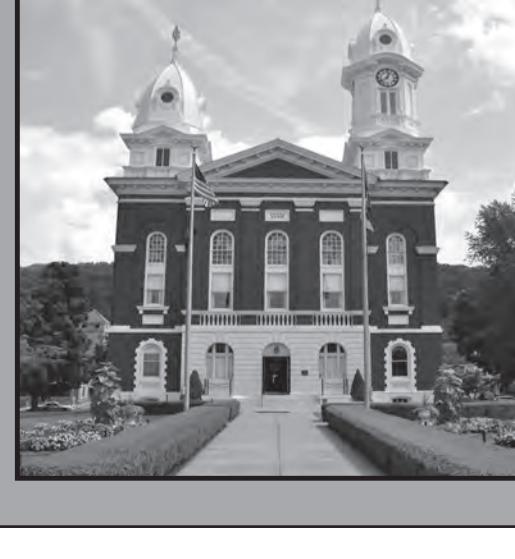
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Franklin sees decrease in building permits in 2025

BY HELEN FIELDING
Staff writer

Inflation is taking its toll on construction projects everywhere, as fewer building permits were issued in 2025 but their overall construction costs were \$1.4 million higher than in 2024.

"I really think it has to do with the cost of everything going up," Franklin Zoning and Code Enforcement Officer Chuck Gibbons said, noting that overall project scope and size didn't seem to have dramatically increased in 2025 over 2024.

Seventy-five building permits were issued in the city in 2025, down from 82 that were issued in 2024. Total project costs for 2025, however, were just over \$4.6 million. In 2024, costs were just over \$3.2 million.

Of the 75 permits in 2025, 47 were commercial and 28 were residential.

Among the commercial projects in 2025 were several renovations related to new or relocated businesses.

One of the more expensive projects was the renovation of an apartment complex above the former Callaghan's Pharmacy into Trails to Ales Airbnbs.

The \$350,000 renovation permit for the short-term rentals was the first building permit issued in 2025, Gibbons said. The rentals are now up and running.

Trails to Ales Realty also obtained a \$60,000 permit to renovate the lower level of that building, 1262 Liberty St., so that Daffin's Candies could move across the street into the old Callaghan's space. Daffin's is also now up and running in that building.

Clark's Donuts opened an additional location in Franklin in 2025, at 1259 Liberty St., which is the former site of Edible Arrangements.

Several other new businesses in 2025 included Racks 'n Snacks, a pool hall that originally opened on 13th Street but is now at 1283 Liberty St., in the ground floor of the historical Exchange Bank building.

Rack 'n Snacks had first opened in what was Hoyle's Chop Shop, after the barber-

shop moved just up the street to 503 13th St.

Other new businesses include Luxe Mane Hair Salon, at 409 13th St.; Dev's Franklin Mart convenience store, in the old Crosby's at 151 N. 13th St.; Franklin Gold & Diamond Exchange, at 1263 Elk St.; Timeless Treasure Trove, at 1217 Liberty St.; and Wildflower Studios, at 303 13th St.

Something Clever also moved next door into the old Feldman Jeweler's space.

A building permit for about \$67,000 also was issued to the Barrow-Civic Theatre for the repair and restoration of its marquee, which will change from neon to LED-based lighting that will be better protected from the weather.

"Nobody makes neon letters anymore," Gibbons observed. Even when he was on the Barrow's board years ago, "there was only one place doing custom neon, and it was very expensive. And when it froze ... it would break it."

On the residential side, the majority of the 28 permits were for external repairs or remodels on homes, such as decks or porches, according to Gibbons, but there weren't too many additions.

However, this year Franklin did see the construction of two new houses, one that was built at the site of a structure that was razed and the other that was part of a land subdivision. The project costs were about \$322,000 and \$500,000, respectively, two of the largest projects the city saw in 2025, Gibbons said.

Three homes and buildings were demolished by private owners in the city last year, and the city has acquired or is in the process of acquiring five dilapidated and decayed houses for demolition, he said.

Cloudpermit software

In 2025, the city launched use of Cloudpermit software for all licenses and permits, as well as inspections and code enforcement issues.

So far, Gibbons said, the software has considerably cut down time he has to spend on items.

"For me, it's a game changer," he said. "It's about a third of the time to either review a permit, or issue an enforce-

ment notice or issue a retail food license."

One of the main reasons is everything is now virtual and paperless; so messages can be sent digitally and instantly, and the city also doesn't have to make paper copies of paper documents, he said.

Building plans are now done digitally, rather than on paper. Since the city's third-party building inspectors are located in New Castle, it has greatly improved convenience of working with them, as many things can be done digitally without the need to travel to Franklin, he said.

"If there's a discrepancy in the plans or something's needed, or there's an issue with the inspection, they can enter it and the comment goes right to the applicant," Gibbons said.

The new software, he said, also has helped him with code enforcement. In cases of properties in which cleanup is needed to resolve issues, the owners can send photographs and notes about their progress to Gibbons' email.

"I can see that being a real help in the future," he observed. "I don't have to call them and ask how it's going if they're sending me messages."

On the resident and contractor end, Gibbons said it has been a "learning curve — some good, some bad" — but noted people may call the city and "we'll help them through the process."

He said those with no email address may go to City Hall for assistance.

Ahead in 2026

Gibbons said Edward Jones has plans to open an office at 1231 Liberty St., the old location of Daffin's Candies. Gibbons was unsure if the office would be new or the relocation of an existing office.

And the city plans to demolish more blighted and dilapidated structures as funds become available.

HELEN FIELDING, reporter for The Derrick and The News-Herald, can be reached at helenfielding@thederrick@gmail.com or 814-677-8374.

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Conair marks purposeful progress in 2025

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Following a year of high-profile product launches, 2025 has been a year of purposeful progress for Conair. Amid shifting economic conditions, the company focused on strengthening its foundation, expanding capabilities and positioning the business for long-term growth.

"For Conair, 2025 was a year of adjustment and resilience," said John Erkert, CEO of PiovanGroup North America (PGNA) and president of Conair Group. "We saw strong momentum early in the year, navigated softer conditions mid-year and closed with renewed strength and confidence." Erkert, who assumed the presidency in November 2024, brings more than three decades of leadership experience within PiovanGroup companies across North America.

A pivotal milestone occurred in January 2025, when the investment group Investindustrial acquired a majority stake in Piovan S.p.A., returning PiovanGroup and its subsidiaries — Conair, Thermal Care, UnaDyn and Pelletron — to private ownership.

"This change gives us greater freedom to think and invest for the long term," Erkert explained. "We are no longer driven by quarterly market pressures. Instead, we can focus on strategy, innovation and sustained growth."

A strong foundation in Franklin

That future is built daily by the 165 employees at Conair's Franklin facility. As business expands from individual auxiliary products into integrated systems, roles in Franklin

continue to evolve. The Franklin-based Customer Care group is a prime example; what once focused on parts and repairs has grown into a comprehensive organization supporting intelligent equipment with predictive maintenance and proactive in-plant service agreements.

Despite economic and trade-related headwinds, every Conair business segment recorded growth in 2025. "Our downstream extrusion auxiliary equipment business had a great year," said Nick Paradiso, vice president of sales. Unit sales, many of them assembled and shipped from Franklin, showed steady, consistent growth.

The shift to centralized systems Conair's Systems group delivered another strong performance, designing and installing integrated plant systems valued at \$250,000 and above. The year's highlights include the near completion of the largest systems project in the company's history.

The growth reflects a broader industry shift toward centralized systems," Erkert said. "Instead of standalone equipment next to each machine, customers are investing in centralized conveying, drying, blending and heat-transfer systems shared across multiple production lines." These complex systems require deep expertise in design and engineering, leading Conair to plan the addition of a fifth installation team in 2026.

Expanding in-house fabrication

Vertical integration is also advancing on the Franklin assembly floor, where Conair invested in a new 5,000-square-foot fabrication area. Vice President Rich Shaffer noted the area is equipped with a CNC press brake and automated cobot welding for repetitive tasks.

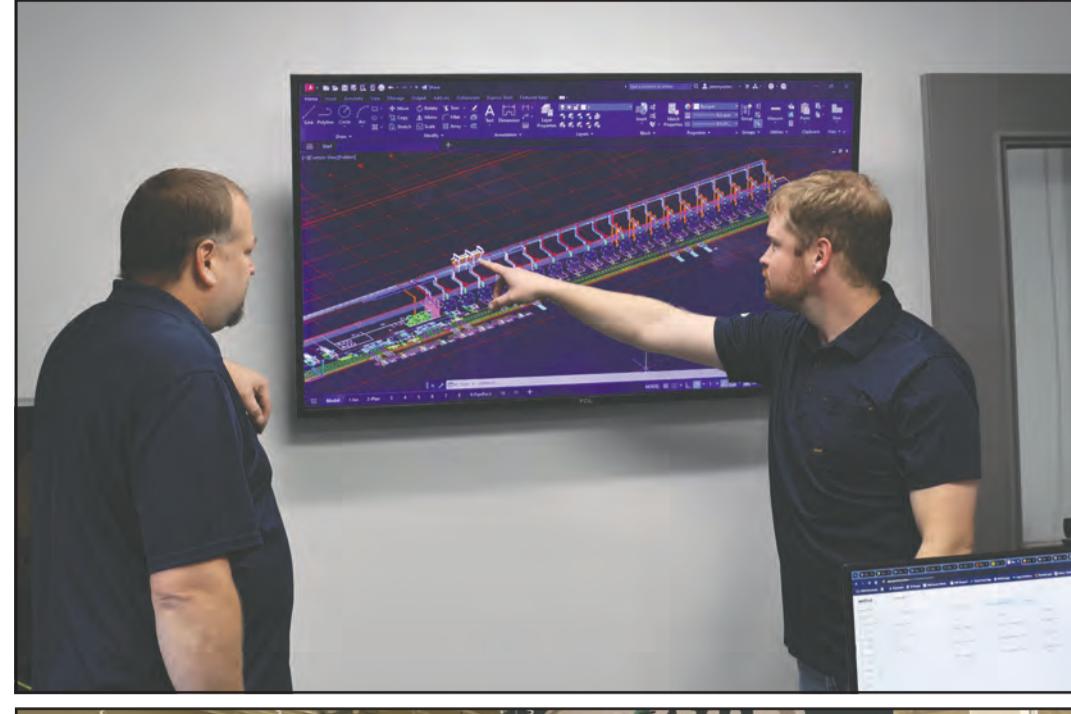
"Automation allows us to do more with a highly skilled, lean team," Shaffer explained. The new shop is currently staffed by two fabricators, with plans to add another team member in 2026.

Investing in people and the community

In December, Conair was named the 2025 Co-Op Employer of the Year by the University of Pittsburgh's Swanson School of Engineering. Since 2018, Conair has hired 27 Pitt co-ops, many of whom have transitioned into full-time roles. Matt Shope, vice president of engineering, noted the program has become one of Conair's most effective recruiting pipelines.

The company's depth of experience remains a competitive advantage. Across PGNA, 53 employees — nearly one in ten — have more than 25 years of service. Among them is Senior Spare Parts Specialist Alice Castonguay, who received a PiovanGroup Employee Excellence Award. She was one of just five honorees selected from a global workforce of 2,500 employees. Additionally, 14 Franklin employees were recognized with 2025 Service Awards for their combined expertise.

Conair's commitment extends well beyond its plant.



Through a policy providing paid time off for community service, employees contribute to local healthcare fundraisers, youth programs and emergency response efforts. These efforts reflect the same values Conair brings to its customers: commitment, teamwork and a belief that meaningful work creates lasting impact.



The Caring Place celebrates 30 years

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

In 2025, The Caring Place marked 30 years of service to the greater Franklin community. Since opening in 1995, the facility's 100-bed skilled nursing and rehabilitation center and The Purple Iris — a 32-bed personal care home — have provided care to residents and peace of mind to their families across Venango County.

To celebrate the milestone, the facility hosted a reception in August 2025 to thank local families and community members. During the event, the leadership team honored three employees who have been with the organization since its inception: licensed practical nurses Shelly Kenner and Helen Rodibaugh and Director of Marketing and Admissions Rob Yingling.

As part of a commitment to operational growth, The Caring Place appointed a new leadership team in 2025, including Administrator James Stockhausen, Director of Nursing

Angela Dallam and Assistant Director of Nursing Bobbie Shrecengost. The organization also launched a redesigned website, CaringPlaceNursing.com, which features updated photography, a leadership directory and a streamlined online career application portal.

Looking toward 2026, the facility intends to maintain its community engagement through annual events. "We will continue to engage the community by hosting our annual Trick or Treat and investing and participating in local community events," said Stockhausen. The 2026 calendar also includes the annual Independence Day picnic and a Christmas dinner for residents and their guests.

The history of The Caring Place is rooted in a long-held vision of the Churches of God, Allegheny Region Conference. The dream of a "home for the aging" was inspired by the story of a retired pastor who had no place to live during the Great Depression. This vision



led to the opening of Grove Manor in Grove City in 1971.

Recognizing a growing need

in Franklin, Grove Manor Administrator Mary Gray proposed expanding the corporation's services to the area. Gray, alongside board treasurer Howard Potter, formulated a plan to build on the site of the former Franklin Hospital.

On Dec. 21, 1993, 98-year-old Grove Manor resident Connie Shorts used the same gold shovel previously used for the Grove City groundbreaking to break ground for the Franklin facility.

After navigating several development hurdles, The Caring Place officially opened its doors on July 21, 1995. Today, it operates as a non-profit subsidiary of Grove Manor Corporation.

The current leadership team includes James Stockhausen, Angela Dallam, Bobbie Shrecengost and The Purple Iris Administrator Lynne Miller. The organization remains focused on its original mission of providing a "home" environment characterized by hope and healing for the local staff.

Shaw Industries, Welding Technologies invest in skilled trades

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Throughout 2025, Shaw Industries and Welding Technologies focused on long-term stability and steady improvement for both their customers and their workforce in Venango County and the surrounding region.

A central pillar of the companies' progress was a continued investment in skilled trades. By adding experienced welders and machinists while strengthening mentorship and safety programs, the firms have focused on building long-term manufacturing careers rather than just filling positions.

Operationally, the companies streamlined how their welding, machining and quality teams collaborate. By keeping more work "under one roof," parts now move more efficiently from fabrication through finished machining. This integration has not only improved reliability for customers but has provided skilled tradespeople with more hands-on, meaningful work.

The companies continue to be a vital link in the industrial supply chain. They manufacture and repair components for the mining industry's underground and surface applications and have expanded their support for the forging industry. This specialized work on forging rams and dies requires advanced welding, careful analysis and rigorous testing to ensure parts can withstand extreme industrial forces.

Additionally, a growing focus on service and replacement parts has provided consistent, year-round work for the local staff.

Leadership and Succession

Recent leadership changes, guided by owners Jasen

Fry and Mark Amsler, aim to ensure continuity for decades to come. In 2025, Brian Cole was named President and Brandon Kapp was named Vice President. Both leaders bring strong ties to Venango County and a practical, hands-on understanding of manufacturing operations.

The year 2026 will mark a significant milestone with the retirement of Mark Amsler, who has spent more than 30 years with Shaw Industries. His leadership and dedication have been instrumental in building the company's reputation and supporting the local community.

Looking Ahead

In 2026, the companies plan to expand employment opportunities for welders and machinists as demand increases. A primary goal is to foster manufacturing careers that allow employees to work close to home while building valuable, high-level skills.

Plans for the coming year include maximizing existing facilities and equipment to take on additional work within the region, with a continued focus on complex repair work for heavy industrial customers.

A Shared History

Shaw Industries was founded in 1741 in Franklin by George Shaw. Welding Technologies was established in 2003 by Jasen Fry, who later acquired Shaw Industries in the late 2000s. Today, the companies operate side-by-side as a coordinated manufacturing operation, combining heavy fabrication with precision machining to maintain the values that have guided them for generations.

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SFPC grows through skill and tech in 2025

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

In 2025, Specialty Fabrication and Powder Coating (SFPC) experienced a year of moderate growth as the market deteriorated for several customers. However, this shift in business created unique opportunities for employees to expand their skills by fabricating new products they had never built before.

The company's highly skilled workforce was able to make the transition quickly to meet shifting needs. Jarrad Griffin, vice president of operations, noted that this adaptability allowed a key customer to reduce lead times and see further growth, which in turn led to additional orders for SFPC. Jarrad added that the company was successfully able to bring in new customers and continue to diversify the business throughout the year.

Owner and CEO Rod Griffin attributes the success of the company first to God for His direction and for allowing the team the privilege to serve Him, then to all the customers for entrusting SFPC with their business. He also emphasized that the valued employees they have been blessed with over the years remain crucial in maintaining the company's level of success.

"Next to our customers, our biggest asset is our employees," Rod Griffin said. "I can't say enough about how blessed we are to have great employees. Our employees support the company, the community and are instrumental in SFPC's growth. They are not just numbers! These people are part of our work family. We care for our 130 employees, and we pray for them every day."

A Focus on State-of-the-Art Technology

Strategic investment in equipment has also driven the company's success. The purchase of a 10K Fiber Laser with a fully automated parts picker and material storage capable of holding 225,000 pounds of material has helped

SFPC secure additional business and meet specific customer requirements.

Looking ahead to 2026, Jarrad Griffin emphasized that continuing to diversify the customer base and adding technology remains one of the most important plans for sustained growth. "To do otherwise would result in the company becoming stagnant and not being able to provide what customers have come to expect from us," he said.

Chief Financial Officer Shawn Wingard noted that the management team will continue to look at equipment needs as the year evolves, specifically targeting machinery that adds to fabrication capabilities to support current and future customers.

Commitment to Growth and Workforce

Rod Griffin expressed his desire to first ensure that SFPC is always able to supply the needs of current customers. "Secondly, we must continue to have the capacity to further diversify to ensure job security for our current and future employees," he said. "We owe a lot to our customers, and along with our appreciation for their business, they have also brought us additional business by recommending SFPC to other companies."

While 2025 was a moderate year, Rod expects 2026 to be even better, provided the economy remains stable. To support this anticipated growth, the company is currently recruiting welders, robotic welding operators, powder painters, press brake operators and material handlers or kitters. SFPC offers an excellent benefit package that includes a comprehensive health care plan and a matching 401k program.

For more information about Specialty Fabrication and Powder Coating, visit www.specfab.com.

Franklin Retail and Business Association plans event growth

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Franklin Retail and Business Association is entering 2026 with a focus on expanding its community events and enhancing its digital presence following a significant administrative transition.

In 2025, Ryan Rudegear assumed administrative duties for the association, succeeding Jenny Taylor. As part of a new strategic partnership to streamline local operations, the association now shares office space

and an administrative position with the Franklin Area Chamber of Commerce.

Looking ahead to the coming year, the organization is dedicated to improving and growing its current slate of public events. Additionally, a major priority for 2026 is the promotion of the association's gift card program. The group plans to specifically highlight the ease of purchasing these gift cards directly through its website to support local commerce.

Trails to Ales celebrates record year, sets 2026 concert series

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Trails to Ales Brewery celebrated its most successful year in history in 2025, solidifying its role as a cornerstone of the Franklin and Sugarcreek Township culture and economy. Recently honored as the Franklin Area Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year, the brewery capped the year by expanding its workforce to 55 full- and part-time staff members.

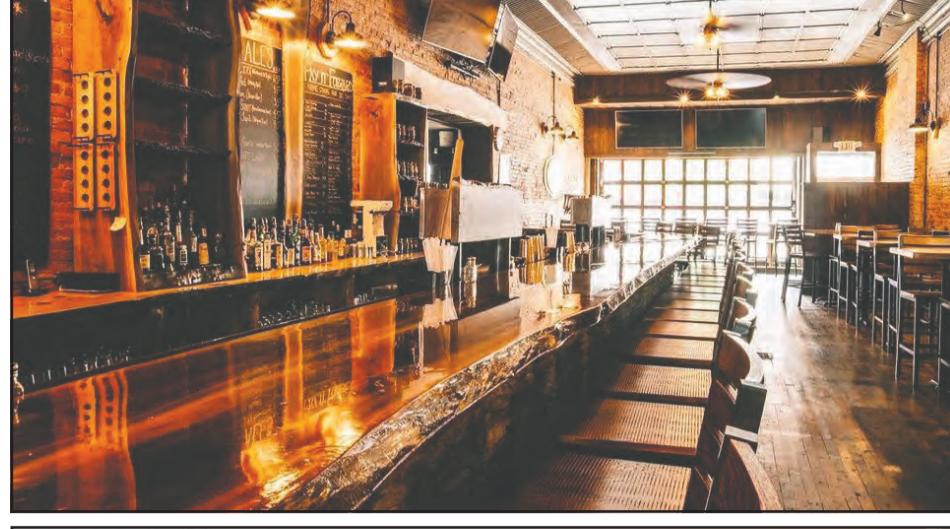
A primary achievement was the October completion of a new outdoor pavilion constructed from reclaimed barnwood. The addition features a spacious stage, two new bathrooms and an original barnwood dance floor, significantly increasing the brewery's capacity for large-scale community events and gatherings.

The brewery also expanded its downtown footprint in May 2025 with the opening of "Trails to Ales Downtown Suites." Located on Liberty Street, the six fully renovated, high-end units offer a variety of configurations: a three-bedroom unit, two one-bedroom units, two two-story units with downstairs pullout couches, and a large suite overlooking Liberty Street that accommodates four guests. Each suite includes a full kitchen, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the local atmosphere with the conveniences of home.

The "Sip and Shop" initiative also saw record participation this year. The program allows visitors to enjoy alcoholic beverages while exploring downtown retail shops, a synergy that brewery leadership says has promoted Franklin as a premier destination for regional tourism.

To further this momentum, the brewery launched the "Destination Franklin" promotional video to highlight the area's vibrant atmosphere. Collaboration remains a central theme for the coming year; following a successful Bee Gees tribute concert held in partnership with the Barrow Civic Theatre, the brewery has already scheduled two more collaborations for 2026. Tribute bands for ABBA and Fleetwood Mac are slated to perform in August and October 2026, respectively.

As it reflects on a record-breaking 2025, Trails to Ales Brewery remains poised to enhance its role as a community hub through its continued commitment to local collaboration and exceptional guest experiences.



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B & M Floors stays rooted in community, customer service

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

B & M Floors reflects on a productive and relationship-driven 2025, marked by continued service to residential and commercial customers throughout the region and a renewed focus on communication and outreach. As a locally-owned business with decades of experience, B & M Floors remained committed to helping customers make informed flooring and mattress decisions with confidence and clarity.

Throughout 2025, the team at B & M Floors placed added emphasis on seasonal marketing efforts designed to better inform customers about product options, installation services and showroom availability. During the holiday season, coordinated promotions highlighted a wide range of flooring solutions — including hardwood, luxury vinyl, laminate, tile and carpet — as well as mattresses and sleep products. These efforts focused on education and accessibility, ensuring customers understood

both product benefits and timelines during a traditionally busy period.

In addition to marketing initiatives, B & M Floors continued to prioritize personalized service. Customers were supported through every step of the process, from selection and measurement to installation and follow-up. This hands-on approach, combined with experienced installers and trusted product lines, remained a cornerstone of the company's success in 2025.

Looking ahead to 2026, B & M Floors plans to build on this momentum with expanded outreach and continued refinement of its marketing and communication strategies. Forecast priorities include increased product education, greater visibility of in-stock options and ongoing efforts to help customers plan projects with confidence throughout the year rather than seasonally.

The company also anticipates continued interest in

durable, low-maintenance flooring solutions and comfortable, quality sleep products as homeowners and businesses invest in long-term improvements. B & M Floors remains focused on offering reliable guidance, quality materials and dependable installation services to meet these evolving needs.

As B & M Floors enters 2026, the company remains grounded in the values that have guided it for years: trust, craftsmanship and community. Customers are invited to visit the showroom at 1969 Allegheny Blvd. (Route 8), Reno, PA 16343, to explore available products and speak with knowledgeable staff about upcoming projects.

B & M Floors is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to noon, with evening appointments available by request.

For more information, call 814-678-5216.



The Witherup House marks 16 years of local history

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Entering its 16th year of providing respite to visitors, The Witherup House saw 2025 become a year defined by deep local roots and what owners Ann and Marty Rudegeair described as an "Old Home Week" atmosphere.

The historic lodging, located at 828 Liberty St., offers three second-story rooms, each featuring a queen bed. Two of the rooms include en-suite baths, while the third features an en-suite powder room with a shower conveniently available on the first floor. The strength of the establishment's hospitality was

reflected in its 2025 statistics, which showed that 50% of its guests were repeat visitors.

The past year was marked by several extraordinary reunions. One guest discovered a direct genealogical link to the home's namesake, tracing a common ancestor back to Abraham Witherup, who was born in 1787. The guest was identified as Ann's third cousin in once removed.

Another highlight featured a surprise 90th birthday stay for a woman whose daughter booked the room her mother had slept in as an adolescent during the 1940s and 1950s. The visit sparked

detailed conversations about the house's evolution over the decades.

The Rudegeairs also hosted guests who visited specifically to share memories of their first-grade teacher, Miss Borland. It was revealed that the teacher, then an 18-year-old fresh out of state teacher's college, was actually Ann's mother.

As The Witherup House moves into 2026, it continues to serve as a hub for those exploring the Franklin area, maintaining a legacy of preserving local history through the personal stories of its guests.

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Benjamin's Roadhouse plans roadhouse-style menu shift



SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Located in the heart of historic downtown Franklin, Benjamin's Roadhouse is entering 2026 with a new culinary direction and a leadership team focused on enhancing the guest experience.

Named after Benjamin Franklin, the restaurant has been solely owned by Richard Jardin of Titusville since 2000. Situated across from the courthouse, the venue offers guests a prime view of Bandstand & Fountain Park. The facility features a 62-seat dining room and a 64-seat four-season patio equipped with heated floors and a fireplace. From early spring through late fall, an additional 72 patrons can enjoy the "yard" seating under the restaurant's signature red umbrellas.

A Team Effort

General Manager Ashley Keener, of Franklin, who began her career at Benjamin's in 2018, leads the daily operations. Keener and Jardin are frequently seen personally tending to the restaurant's garden displays and annual Christmas decorations.

In the kitchen, newly hired Head Chef Theodore "Teddy" Firster of Franklin

returned to the team in December. Firster is leveraging his years of experience to improve kitchen efficiency and ticket times during high-volume hours. He is joined by Lead Cook Nicholas Kahle of Clarion, who helps orchestrate a team of five cooks.

Front of House and Bar Manager Megan Miller, who has been with the establishment since its 2023 re-opening, continues to guide staffing and atmosphere. Benjamin's currently employs approximately 25 local individuals.

New Flavors for 2026

Looking ahead, Benjamin's is shifting its menu toward more "roadhouse-style" fare. This includes in-house smoked products, premium steak cuts, BBQ options and Prime Rib. To prepare for brand-new menus each spring and fall, the restaurant features weekly specials throughout the winter and summer.

The coming year will also see the introduction of buffet options, discounted wing nights and expanded breakfast selections. The restaurant remains a popular destination for larger parties, including reunions and holiday events, and offers



both on-site catering and local delivery. Residents can sample Benjamin's Roadhouse products at upcoming community events such as

Franklin on Ice, May Mart, Blues & BBQ and Applefest. Live music will also return to the yard on Fridays from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Svetz Energy Services expands alternative energy solutions

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Svetz Energy Services is expanding its operations to meet a growing demand for alternative energy projects and multi-facility management as organizations seek to lower costs and reduce their environmental footprints.

Gary Svetz, who founded the company in 1996, noted that as technology drives down the cost of new materials, organizations are increasingly investing in long-term energy solutions. The firm has seen a particular rise in customers with multiple facilities looking to implement innovative energy controls and meet strategic environmental initiatives.

"We are seeing more organizations wanting to be more

environmentally and cost-reduction driven to meet internal strategic goals," Svetz said.

The company's efficiency projects address a wide range of facility needs, including air compressors, HVAC systems, lighting, facility structure, roofing and window systems, controls and solar applications. Strategic utility purchasing for electric power and natural gas also remains a priority due to ongoing volatility in the futures markets.

A significant area of growth for the firm is the implementation of demand response programs. These initiatives allow organizations to assist in balancing power grid needs and earn revenue by reducing power consumption

during peak periods. Svetz Energy Services provides the technical evaluation for these programs, including specific pre-event timing strategies based on a facility's power usage levels.

To maximize return on investment, the firm researches all available grants, incentives, sales tax audits, rebates and low-interest funding alternatives. This financial strategy is designed to provide manufacturing compa-

nies with the best possible path for implementation.

Current projects under management include solar arrays, methane digester to electric power conversion, air compressor system controls, fleet fuel conversion systems and high-efficiency LED lighting applications.

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Maurer's Trading Post celebrates 45 years; appreciation days will return

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Maurer's Trading Post is marking 45 years of service to the region, celebrating a journey that began in a modest 20-by-30-foot building in the spring of 1981.

Since its opening, the store has expanded into a 26,000-square-foot destination spanning two floors. Today, the showroom houses approximately 4,000 firearms along with ammunition, reloading supplies, archery equipment, a dedicated fishing department, clothing, footwear and cutlery. Notably, Maurer's remains one of the few retailers in the area to offer live bait, while also carrying a full selection of pet and wildlife feed.

2026 Outlook and Services

As the business enters 2026, management plans to continue its aggressive inventory expansion to keep pace with the latest trends in the outdoor and sporting goods industry.

The store's popular Outdoorsmen Club Membership will return for the new year,

offering members a chance to win various prizes. For items not currently in stock, Maurer's continues to offer a special-order service to ensure customers find exactly what they need.

The Trading Post is also a major hub for the regional firearms market, purchasing used firearms and estate collections. Additionally, the business is a local leader in gun raffles, providing essential fundraising support for fire halls, clubs and community organizations.

Community and Advocacy

A hallmark of the business is its advocacy for sportsmen and gun owner rights. The company also remains committed to workforce development in the region, noting that it is always accepting applications for individuals eager to learn the outdoor industry.

Customers can look forward to the return of the annual March Customer Appreciation Days in 2026, an event that has become a staple for the local sporting community.



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Liberty Street Antiques reflects on 2025

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Located at 1239 Liberty Street in downtown Franklin, Liberty Street Antiques reflects on a strong and meaningful 2025, highlighted by continued community connection, thoughtfully curated inventory and growing engagement with both longtime patrons and new visitors. Throughout the year, the shop remained a favorite destination for those seeking antiques, primitives, vintage décor, collectibles and distinctive gifts that celebrate craftsmanship and history.

In addition to its antique offerings, Liberty Street Antiques continued its commitment to supporting local makers and regional businesses. Shoppers enjoyed a wide variety of locally sourced products, including handcrafted candles, maple syrup, soaps and lotions, jewelry, gourmet fudge and offerings from Conneaut Cellars Winery. These carefully selected items complemented the shop's traditional inventory and added to its reputation as a place to find meaningful, giftable treasures for every season.

As proud members of the Franklin Retail & Business Association and the Franklin Area Chamber of Commerce, Liberty Street Antiques actively participated in Franklin's vibrant community life throughout 2025. The shop welcomed visitors during signature events such as Applefest, the Wine & Spirits Walk, Light Up Night and Old-Fashioned Christmas, as well as during extended holiday shopping hours and special evenings featuring wine and refreshments. These events provided opportunities to connect with neighbors, visitors, and fellow downtown businesses while celebrating the unique charm and spirit of Franklin.

Looking ahead to 2026, Liberty Street Antiques is excited to continue building on this momentum. The coming year will also mark an exciting milestone for the shop, as Liberty Street Antiques plans to expand, while remaining at its current downtown location. This expansion will allow for additional inventory, enhanced displays and new opportunities to showcase antiques, vintage finds and locally made goods.

Plans for the coming year include refreshed inventory, expanded seasonal displays and an ongoing focus on supporting Pennsylvania-made and USA-made products. The shop will continue seeking out new local vendors and artisans to ensure its offerings remain fresh and reflective of the community it serves.

Liberty Street Antiques also looks forward to expanding its in-store experiences in 2026, including creative workshops, themed shopping events and intimate gatherings that encourage customers to slow down, browse and enjoy the welcoming atmosphere the shop is known for. These events are designed to foster connection while offering a relaxed and enjoyable shopping experience.

To stay informed about upcoming events, new arrivals, and special announcements, visit libertystreetantiques.com and follow [facebook.com/LibertyStreetAntiques](https://www.facebook.com/libertystreetantiques).

For inquiries, please contact Liberty Street Antiques at 814-437-6550 or email libertystreetantiques1239@gmail.com.



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A. Crivelli Subaru Teams Up with 519 Strong, Raises \$56,880 for Charity

Subaru USA began a charitable program several years ago. They donate a fixed amount per new Subaru sold to select charities. A. Crivelli sought approval for local charity 519 Strong to be included, and was approved.

Jeremy Coast was 18 when he passed away after a 3-year battle with leukemia. He was a Franklin Area High School Class of 2015 graduate and a member of the

AWRCS—A True American Woods Racing Series. Motocross was a passion of Jeremy's; his number, 519—also his birthday—lends itself to the name of the 519 Strong Foundation. 519 Strong raises money in Jeremy's name to help families with medical travel, lodging, and food expenses. A. Crivelli and Subaru have raised nearly \$56,880 for 519 Strong since their partnership began.



Song-of-the-Day Contest — The Big Winner in 2025

The Auto Giant and Forever Broadcasting were singing from the same page during the 4th Annual Song-of-the-Day Contest! For *eight days a week* through June and July, the radio sang with the *sound of music*, and deep discounts from A. Crivelli dealerships and numerous area businesses. It all came down to the *final countdown* in August when the winner

took it all. 2025's winner was Kimmie Copley of Pleasantville, PA. The prize was a two-year lease or a cash prize option!

Rockin' Rich and Bullfrog provided the entertainment as emcees of the event. Join us this year for more *hot fun in the summertime* and the 5th Annual Song-of-the-Day contest.

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Something Clever lives on with new owners

BY HELEN FIELDING
Staff writer

Franklin women's clothing and gift boutique Something Clever gained new owners in 2025 after the founders moved to retire, filling the space that formerly held Feldman Jewelers.

New owners Inde and Bobby Hawkins reached out to Niki and Doug Volmrich, the founders and former owners of Something Clever in late 2024, shortly before Feldman Jewelers, which the Volmrichs also owned, closed after the Volmrichs were unable to find a buyer for the 153-year-old business upon their decision to retire from running it.

Something Clever, however, was still open, and "I reached out to Doug and Niki and said, 'Do you want to

sell?'" Inde Hawkins said in an interview.

They offered to buy the business "to keep it alive and well," Inde Hawkins said. "Niki created something very special in this town, and we wanted to keep it alive if able to do so."

The old location next-door to the former Feldman's closed in mid-March, and the new location held a fashion show in April, was open for May Mart, and officially held its soft opening in mid-May. The Volmrichs still own the former Feldman building, where Something Clever is now located.

Hawkins said the business has stayed much the same, although its new ownership has added some product diversity and slightly widened the age range, appealing to people from around their 30s upward.

The business has also added more gift lines, as well as a "smidge" of kids' and men's offerings.

The Hawkinses also kept on long-time store manager Lisa Anderson for the transitions. After the new owners made it through the transition, Anderson retired in December, ending a 12-year career serving the community.

Thus far, customers have been very positive, as well as nostalgic, she said. "People come in and it's not Feldman's anymore. That pulled at the heartstrings a little bit. Yet, they're happy to see something here and it's not empty."

HELEN FIELDING, reporter for The Derrick and The News-Herald, can be reached at helenfielding@thederrick.com or 814-677-8374.



By Helen Fielding

Inde Hawkins, left, who along with her husband Bobby is the new owner of women's clothing and gift boutique Something Clever in Franklin, chats with two customers and with store manager Lisa Anderson, second from left, in the business's new location in the former Feldman Jewelers earlier this month.



Fiscus Confectionery enters wholesale after standout year

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Fiscus Confectionery, a division of FISCUS Mechanization Co. LLC, is transitioning its business model for 2026 following a year of exponential growth.

Under the leadership of representative Jonathan Fiscus, the company spent 2025 introducing its caramel apples and chocolate candies to the region through major events like the Cranberry Festival, Applefest and the Autumn Leaf Festival. In 2026, the business plans to "sunset" these festival sales to focus primarily on expanding its wholesale and fundraising operations.

Looking Back

What began as a personal interest for Myers has evolved into a brand recognized for its coverage of the people and moments that define Venango County. Eight One Four Photography continues to grow while remaining grounded in its original purpose of sharing the character of Franklin through consistent documentation of its unique landscapes and communities.

active environment within a community gathering space.

Myers also plans to upgrade key photography equipment in 2026 to ensure the work continues to reflect the detail and character of the region. Event and business photography will remain a primary focus, supporting local festivals and civic organizations with high-quality visual content.

The move is part of a larger strategic vision for the parent company, which was founded in 2023. While FISCUS Mechanization eventually aims to return to heavy manufacturing, management chose to launch the confectionery as a low-capital startup to build a stable financial foundation.

"One of the objectives of the organization is to increase the standard of living for individuals in the Franklin and Oil City areas," the company

stated, noting its mission to pull money from the global economy into the local economy through manufacturing.

Currently, Venango County residents can find Fiscus Confectionery products year-round at third-party retail locations, including Hollenbaugh's Hometown Meat Market in Clarion, the Maker's Market in the Clearview Mall and Totalus Coffee Shop in Butler. The company's website, fiscusconfectionery.com, also went live in 2025 to support e-commerce and wholesale inquiries.

Licensed as a food production establishment by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the confectionery offers 10 standard products for school and organization fundraisers. The lineup ranges from time-honored recipes like chocolate peanut butter fudge and classic almond or cashew bark to modern varieties like s'mores and Fruity Pebbles bark.

As the company enters 2026, it expects to see its products in an increasing number of local storefronts as it doubles down on its regional wholesale partnerships.

Eight One Four Photography expands through digital reach

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Eight One Four Photography reported significant growth in 2025, driven by an expansion in regional visual storytelling and new local retail collaborations.

Operated by Thomas Myers, a Utica native and long-time Venango County resident, the brand focuses on documenting the scenic landscapes, civic events and small businesses of the Franklin area. The brand's imagery, which frequently highlights Franklin's streets, riverfronts and seasonal transitions, reached more than 1.5 million views on Facebook during a 90-day period late in 2025. This digital engagement reflects a high level of interest from both current residents and those who have moved away but remain connected to the region.



In addition to digital content, the business expanded its physical product offerings in 2025. A partnership with Something Clever Boutique allowed for the in-store sale of Franklin-themed Christmas ornaments, a product line that saw increased visibility throughout the year.

Plans for 2026 For the

coming year, Eight One Four Photography intends to build on this community-centered approach while creating new avenues for public interaction. A new collaboration with Trails to Ales is planned, where the photography will be displayed and available for purchase in a public setting. This project aims to bring local imagery into a more inter-

Liberty Electronics builds on record year, plans for expansion

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Liberty Electronics, a premium supplier of cables, harnesses and cabinets, reported record sales growth again in 2025. The company, headquartered in Franklin, achieved these milestones through a combination of organic growth and the addition of several new strategic partners.

Liberty's military and aerospace divisions are preparing for continued expansion as inventories for ordnance are replaced on existing programs. Furthermore, the company is seeing a shift as additional programs move from the prototype stage into full-scale production. Management noted that increases to the defense budget by the Department of Defense and efforts to streamline procurement are expected to drive

significant growth for years to come.

In the power generation sector, Liberty's expansion into electrification continues to yield dividends. As the national power grid requires significant upgrades, the company is positioning itself at the forefront of nuclear energy, battery storage and power transmission projects.

Market Diversification and Global Impacts

While the aerospace sector surges, Liberty reported mixed results in the rail industry. Demand for new Tier 4 locomotives remains strong, yet overall rail demand decreased year-over-year. This was attributed to reductions in consumer demand and increased costs resulting from tariffs. Conversely, Light Rail Vehicles

— or transit cars — are beginning to ramp up after years of idled programs caused by the loss of ridership during the 2020 pandemic.

The mining sector remains a high-demand market for Liberty. Worldwide demand for raw materials and rising commodity prices have elevated mining activity. Specifically, copper demand has seen a significant boost driven by the construction of new AI data centers across the globe.

Despite some market slowdowns caused by delays in government appropriations and adjustments in global trade, Liberty Electronics expects a full return to growth leading into 2027. The company remains committed to the local community, continuing to partner with regional suppliers to retain and create local jobs.

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Sassy's Boutique marks five years of style

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Sassy's Clothing & Gift Boutique marked a major milestone in 2025, celebrating its fifth year in business with a significant expansion of its apparel lines and community footprint. The boutique, which opened its doors in downtown Franklin in 2021, has evolved into a destination for contemporary fashion, introducing labels such as Tribal Fashions, Liverpool Los Angeles, Love Token and Kerisma.

As the boutique enters 2026, owner Stephanie Felmlee is pivoting toward interactive retail and American-made goods. A highlight of the upcoming year is the launch of a candle bar experience featuring Milkhouse Candles. The interactive station will allow shoppers to create personalized candles using the American-made product line.

"Growing up in Franklin was the best,"

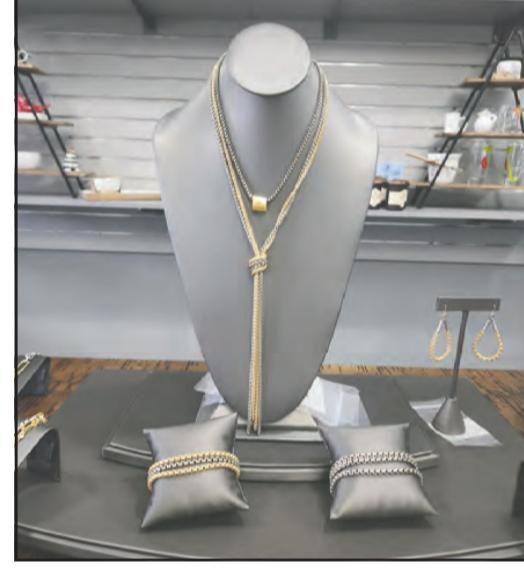
'Growing up in Franklin was the best, working in Franklin was a learning experience and owning Sassy's is a privilege.'

Stephanie Felmlee

Sassy's Clothing & Gift Boutique owner

Felmlee said. "Working in Franklin was a learning experience and owning Sassy's is a privilege."

That connection to the community is driving the boutique's 2026 plans, which include the addition of Solmate Socks — a brand known for its playful, mismatched aesthetic — and an expanded schedule of in-store events.



Following a successful run of creative activities last year, Felmlee is refining a calendar designed to maintain the boutique's reputation as a community gathering place.

Customer loyalty remains a focal point for the shop. Building on the 2025 enhancements to its Loyalty Program, Sassy's is introducing a new Birthday Club. Registered members will receive a special gift when visiting the store within seven days before or after their birthday.

While the boutique continues to grow its inventory and lifestyle offerings, Felmlee says the core mission remains rooted in personalized service.

"That sense of gratitude is reflected in the way the boutique operates — with intention, appreciation, and a strong commitment to the people it serves," Felmlee said.

Franklin Industries marks 125 years with record growth

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Heading into its 125th year of operation, Franklin Industries is reporting a landmark period of growth defined by a nearly 20% increase in tons shipped and a 30% rise in order volume over the previous year.

The regional producer of rolled steel products attributed the 2025 gains to a strategic expansion into non-traditional markets, which helped offset a challenging year for the highway sign segment.

The mill's operational strength was underscored by several production records, including the highest number of rails processed in a single day, a new yard rail record, and a production milestone on the Highway 800-ton press. Management credited these achievements to both the efficiency of the mill and the dedication of its workforce.

Automation and Lean manufacturing principles remained



at the forefront of the company's strategy. Under the leadership of Industrial Engineer Casey McNaughton, automation projects were expanded across production departments to improve consistency. Additionally, partnerships with the Northwest Industrial Resource Center (NWIRC) led to the implementation of mill bit furnaces, which have successfully reduced start-up times.

Franklin Industries also reinforced its ties to the regional economy by prioritizing Western Pennsylvania vendors for machine shop services, heat treating and product finishing.

"Employee engagement remains a cornerstone of our culture," the company stated, noting the importance of the annual winter Awards Banquet and the summer Family Day at Waldameer Park, which includes a paid holiday for staff.

Looking toward 2026, the company plans to pursue



more Department of Transportation bid opportunities and expand its export capabilities. As it celebrates its 125th anniversary as a cornerstone of local industry, Franklin Industries remains focused on diversification and operational excellence to meet future challenges.

Anderson Furniture Co. restores historic floors, plans more upgrades

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Anderson Furniture Co., one of the oldest retail businesses in downtown Franklin, is blending historical preservation with modern upgrades following a successful 2025.

The company completed a major remodel of its third-floor main showroom last year, installing a new ceiling, lighting and paint. During the process, workers removed carpeting to reveal and restore the building's original wood floors, which date back to the site's history as a hotel. Similar upgrades, including lighting improvements and

hardwood restoration, were completed across several sections of the second floor.

The physical improvements will continue into 2026 with additional interior remodeling planned for the 225 13th St. location.

Beyond the aesthetics, the company expanded its inventory by adding several new upholstery vendors at popular price points. The showroom continues to emphasize domestic quality, carrying American-made solid wood furniture from Archbold and Mavin, alongside upholstery from Craftmaster and Smith Brothers.

The business has been a staple of the

community since 1910, originally opening on Liberty Street in the building that now houses DeBence Antique Music World. Anderson's moved to its current location in 1915, and the Teig family has owned the store since 1945. Today, it is operated by third-generation proprietor Stephen Teig.

The company also maintains a second location in Volant. Housed in a rebuilt barn since 1992, the Volant store specializes in rustic styles and accessories, serving as a regional shopping destination for customers from Pittsburgh, Ohio, and the local community.

braids, facial waxing, lash lifts and tints, nail services and spa pedicures. They also have tanning beds and offer spray tanning. They also have jewelry, cosmetics, boutique-like items, and specialty hair and tanning products for sale.

The Salon has three full-time stylists,

Elizabeth and two other long-time stylists, Missy Opitz and Shianne Shetler. They are also looking to hire another cosmetologist in the near future. Looking ahead, the salon plans to add new salon services, as well as esthetician-like services, facials and massage therapy.

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FICDA marks 40 years of economic impact

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Franklin Industrial & Commercial Development Authority (FICDA) marked its 40th anniversary in 2025, celebrating a legacy of transformation that began in 1985 with the adaptive reuse of the former Chicago Pneumatic Tool facility.

The milestone year proved to be a period of significant operational momentum. FICDA reached a major goal by welcoming five new tenants, bringing its properties to 100% occupancy. The authority now manages more than 420,000 square feet of fully occupied industrial and commercial space, reflecting sustained business confidence in the City of Franklin.

This physical growth was matched by an aggressive outreach strategy. Throughout 2025, FICDA conducted more than 130 business out-

reach meetings, attracted state investment and connected local entrepreneurs to vital resources. Signature initiatives like the McElhattan Challenge energized the startup ecosystem, while the MakerMinds program provided young entrepreneurs with a foundation in business fundamentals and creativity.

The organization also underwent a period of leadership renewal. Roger McCauley concluded his tenure after decades of service as both executive director and a board member. Longtime board members Jason Wible and Bob Barber also finished their terms, while Mike Nightingale joined the board to provide new oversight. Physical improvements to the Howard Street properties, including updated signage, further reinforced the organization's visible presence in the community.

Vision for 2026: Mentorship and Training

Looking ahead to 2026, FICDA plans to deepen its impact on the local workforce through the launch of a new mentorship program. This initiative will connect emerging entrepreneurs and established business owners with industry experts to encourage knowledge-sharing and provide guidance tailored to specific business needs.

In addition to mentorship, FICDA will expand its role as a regional training hub. In collaboration with local and state experts, the authority will deliver practical, real-world training ranging from Blueprint Reading and Industrial Math to leadership development, business finance and succession planning.

To guide this strategic



direction, the board will be further strengthened in 2026 with the addition of two new members, Sam Lyons and Roy Schmoutz.

"As we reflect on the

past, we do so with pride and gratitude — and with an eye firmly on the future," the organization stated. With 420,000 square feet of business activity as a foundation,

FICDA remains focused on cultivating talent and attracting the investment necessary for the long-term economic vitality of the Franklin community.

Drayer Electric enters employee ownership after 44 years

Company sold to three long-time employees will continue to grow

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

After 44 years of successful operation, Debra and Dan Drayer have announced their retirement and the sale of Drayer Electric Service, LLC to three veteran employees.

The new ownership group consists of Jonathan Drayer, industrial and commercial project manager; Shawna Clark, residential project manager; and Brenda Holt, who will continue her tenure as office manager. All three partners have been with the company for more than 20 years.

The transition is designed to ensure continuity for the company's clientele. The new owners were trained directly by the Drayers and have pledged to maintain the professional

standards and high-quality materials the community has come to expect. The company has also retained Dustin, a long-time electrician and key member of the service team.

Drayer Electric will continue to honor all existing parts and labor warranties. Furthermore, the company remains committed to the regional economy by sourcing materials from local suppliers whenever possible.

Operating from 5312 Georgetown Rd., the

company provides a wide range of electrical expertise. Services include industrial assembly line maintenance, commercial lighting, homeowner generators and EV charger installations. Whether handling large-scale industrial projects or residential repairs, the team continues to focus on providing efficient and cost-effective recommendations.

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Oak Hill Apartments celebrates 50 years of community and housing

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Oak Hill Apartments is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2026, marking a half-century of providing affordable housing and community support in the Franklin and Sugarcreek Township area.

Built in 1976 and extensively rehabilitated in 2016, the property offers Section 8 and Section 236 housing. Over the years, management has worked to keep the complex modern, adding dishwashers and microwaves to all units and installing laundry facilities in the townhouses.

The 2025 calendar year was defined by a strong emphasis on resident welfare. The complex provided 35 residents with family passes

to the Miller Sibley Pool and hosted a community festival featuring train rides, a bounce house and bungee jumping. Holiday traditions remained a priority, with full meals served for Thanksgiving and Christmas, complemented by \$20 grocery store gift cards for all residents.

Education was also a focal point. Residents received 20 Walmart gift cards worth \$50 each for back-to-school needs, while a local facility provided backpacks to all students on the property.

Additionally, the Leon E. Weiner Foundation remains a vital resource for residents, offering assistance for schooling, summer camps and other educational opportunities.

Looking ahead to 2026,

Oak Hill plans to improve its digital infrastructure by transitioning to a new free Wi-Fi provider for all residents.

The community's social calendar will remain full in the coming year. The resident festival will return — this time featuring a dunking tank — and the popular family swimming passes will be distributed again. Other planned activities include an Easter egg hunt and traditional holiday dinners.

"Our mission remains to promote decent and sanitary housing for the residents of Franklin," the property management stated. As Oak Hill enters its 50th year, it continues to evolve to meet the needs of its families while maintaining its role as a cornerstone of local housing.



QuaLex Manufacturing expands to Buffalo Street, plans to add jobs

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

QuaLex Manufacturing LLC Franklin Division entered a major phase of expansion in 2025, opening a new facility at 325 Buffalo St. and increasing its regional workforce by more than 50%.

The new site, located in the former Komatsu/Joy Mining Plant 2, was the primary focus of \$1.3 million in capital investments last year. These upgrades included the purchase of a new robotic weld cell, which is scheduled to become operational in early 2026. As both the original Howard St. location and the new Buffalo St. facility saw growth, combined staffing levels rose from 23 to 36 employees by December.

Looking ahead, management anticipates completing

the final relocation of all Howard St. operations to the Buffalo St. plant in June. This consolidation will be followed by a public open house in mid-2026 to showcase the merged operations.

Future Growth and Industry Potential

Negotiations are currently underway with prospective customers in the energy and heavy construction equipment markets. If these commitments are secured, QuaLex predicts more than \$1 million in additional capital investments for 2026. Such growth is expected to create 15 to 20 new positions for skilled workers in cutting, forming, welding and finishing roles.

The division's steady trajectory is a result of a 2019

partnership between QuaLex Manufacturing and local business owner Greg Wolbert. At the time, Wolbert set out to add 14 new jobs to the area—a goal the company has now far exceeded.

"It couldn't have been a better fit," Wolbert said of the venture. Under his leadership, the Franklin Division has thrived despite challenging economic conditions. Wolbert attributes the team's success to his personal philosophy of leading by example, a value he traces back to his upbringing.

As QuaLex consolidates its footprint in the Franklin and Sugarcreek Township area, it remains positioned for significant investment in both equipment and personnel throughout the coming year.

Cali Rae's consolidates to Liberty Street location

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Cali Rae's is streamlining its downtown presence this month as it consolidates operations into a single expanded boutique. Effective Feb. 1, the business has closed its location at 303 13th St. and will operate exclusively at 1264 Liberty St.

The move follows the July 2025 opening of the Liberty St. storefront, which provided the space necessary to offer a wider variety of clothing options. Owner and founder Christina Ali, who started the family-owned business in 2018, noted that the transition allows the boutique to better focus on its mission of providing stylish, high-quality and affordable apparel.

The business name holds personal significance for the family, stemming from Ali's last name and her daughter



Carley's middle name, Rae. Since opening, the team has traveled to various markets to hand-select products that specifically suit the needs of their local customers.

"We are extremely proud of where we have come since 2018," Ali stated.

On May 1, 2026, the boutique will celebrate eight years of business in down-

town Franklin. As Cali Rae's enters this next chapter, management remains committed to growth and providing comfortable fashion for the surrounding community.



Ripple Effect Guide Service to launch full 2026 season

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Ripple Effect Guide Service is moving to full-scale operations this spring, offering guided trips on the Allegheny River, Lake Erie and other Western Pennsylvania waterways.

The launch follows a period of preparation in 2025, during which Captain Jason Hagg attained his United States Coast Guard (USCG) license. Hagg completed the certification in September and subsequently initiated a soft launch of the business and its website in the early fall.



For the 2026 season, the service is targeting both experienced anglers and beginners. The business model focuses on a "knowledge-sharing" approach, where the guide provides hands-on instruction regarding regional waterways alongside the fishing experience.

In addition to angling, the service has expanded its 2026

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Gardinier-Warren Funeral Home honors century-old legacy

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

GARDINIER-WARREN Funeral Home continues to carry forward a legacy of faith, trust and service that has endured in the Franklin community for more than a century.

Under the leadership of Ryan and Amy Warren, the funeral home remains dedicated to the compassionate traditions established by previous generations. The Warrens emphasize that their unwavering commitment is to provide exceptional care and thoughtful guidance during life's most difficult moments.

"From our family to yours,
we sincerely thank you for plac-

ing your trust in us and allowing us to serve you and those you love," the Warrens stated.

The funeral home's mission focuses on helping families navigate decisions that can often feel overwhelming. The staff takes the time to listen,

staff takes the time to listen, explain options with clarity and guide families so they can move forward with confidence, knowing their arrangements truly honor their loved one.

Beyond its primary services, Gardinier-Warren strives to offer a calm and comforting environment where friends and family can gather to reflect and celebrate a life well lived. By honoring time-respected tra-

ditions while recognizing the individuality of each life, the home ensures that every service is personal and sincere.

The Warrens also expressed deep gratitude for the continued support and involvement of the community. Participation in local events and outreach efforts have allowed the funeral home to become a welcoming space that strengthens bonds with the families it serves.

“It is our privilege to serve as a dependable source of guidance, confidence, and comfort,” the leadership team noted. “Providing thoughtful care and support when it matters most remains our highest priority.”



Father and son launch Nulph Machining and Manufacturing

SUBMITTED ARTICLE

A new father-and-son venture, Nulph Machining and Manufacturing, LLC, has opened its doors in the Franklin Industrial Complex, specializing in larger-than-average, close-tolerance machining.

Owner and founder Keith Nulph brings over 37 years of experience in the tool and die industry to the new business. Having observed a consistent demand for high-capacity precision work throughout his career, Nulph has equipped the 7,000-square-foot shop to handle specialized industrial needs that smaller shops may not be able to accommodate.

The facility's current machinery includes a Daewoo 400B 50HP CNC Lathe with a 21.7-inch maximum turning diameter and a Doosan 2600Y CNC Lathe featuring live tooling and Y-axis capabilities. For milling, the shop utilizes a Haas VF-5 50-taper CNC vertical mill with through-spindle coolant and significant travel dimensions, including 60 inches on the X-axis. The shop is further supported by Harig surface grinders for close-tolerance finishing, a 3-ton overhead crane, and a Clark C500 forklift.

The business represents a bridge between generations of trade expertise. Keith Nulph began his career in 1988 and

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A man wearing a grey hoodie, blue jeans, and a black baseball cap is seated at a light-colored wooden desk, working on a computer. He is using a black keyboard and a black mouse. The computer monitor displays a 3D rendering of a blue coiled spring or cable. To the right of the monitor is a white computer tower with the brand name 'OPEN' visible. On the desk, there is a small yellow sticky note, a black smartphone, a white smartphone, and a small blue book or manual. The desk has two drawers with silver handles. The background shows a workshop environment with various tools and equipment. The man is focused on his work, looking at the screen and interacting with the keyboard and mouse.

"Taking part in those (technological) changes was very working relationships with local manufacturers and area vocational schools. Nulpho Machine and Manufacturing

nological) changes was very motivating and exciting," Nulph said. Now joined by his son, who already has more than eight years in the trade, the duo believes the time is right to make their mark on the future of local machining.

Looking toward 2026, the company's goal is to establish a strong foothold in Venango County by building essential infrastructure and training the next generation of workers. "We are proud of what they do and whose work ethic reflects that," Nulph stated. "We would be happy to provide the training when the opportunity is right."

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