

The Derrick. and The News-Herald • 2026

# BUSINESS

## Review & Forecast

Friday, Feb. 13, 2026

### Section A — Venango County / Oil City

### Section A



File photo by Kara O'Neil

A large crowd overflows on the sidewalk in front of 100 Seneca in Oil City back in July for the grand opening of The Exchange by Side Hustle, a new restaurant and distillery opening on the first floor. The rebirth of the former bank building has served to help boost the local economy. See the story on page A2.

Section A of the Business Review and Forecast takes a look into Venango County government and agencies, along with the businesses, both big and small, in and around Oil City.

In one of the feature stories, the Venango County commissioners said their goal as 2026 unfolds is to continue with economic development. Leading the charge in 2025 was 100 Seneca, the refurbished former bank building, which saw the opening of The Exchange by Side Hustle restaurant on the first floor.

One county official called 100 Seneca "an ignitor for Oil City," as it has driven new investment into the city.

In a look back of what went on in Oil City government, new City Manager Michelle Hoovler talks of the promotion of growth, taking care of Oil City's infrastructure and cleaning up blight.

In addition, the section looks at how the Venango Conservation District is navigating funding challenges as it prepares for its 65th anniversary.

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# Growth remains top priority for Venango County

*100 Seneca provides promise for county's economic future*

BY KARA O'NEIL  
Staff writer

The Venango County commissioners have pledged to continue promotion of economic development as their goal for 2026.

A highlight of 2025 was the opening of The Exchange by Side Hustle restaurant on the first floor of 100 Seneca, Commissioner Sam Breene said.

"It delivered what we hoped it would deliver — an ignitor for Oil City. It has been a big driver of new investment coming into Oil City," Bryan said of 100 Seneca, where The Exchange opened in July.

The former bank building sat vacant for many years before it was purchased by the county in 2017 and turned over to the Economic Development Authority in 2018. A multi-year rehabilitation of the building, largely paid for with grants, was undertaken to give 100 Seneca a new lease on life.

Another large, ongoing project is creating a recreation center in Cranberry Township that would draw people from across the region, the commissioners said, noting though they are involved in the project it is not being led by the county.

The commissioners indicated the Cranberry Mall would be the preferred site for the rec center, but there is a "Plan B" if that doesn't work out, Bryan said, and that the center would be at least a five-year project.

"The goal is to bring in revenue 365 days a year," he said, and that the McElhattan Foundation recently provided grant funding to "keep the conversation going" on the recreation center.

"It will be an economic driver; much bigger than people imagine — a true economic driver," Breene said, who noted recreation centers host youth sports tournaments that draw large numbers of people.

Looking ahead to 2026, Bryan said "the mission hasn't changed — repurpose the mall, bring in new residents and find industrial space" for businesses that want to move to Venango County or expand here.

According to the commissioners, businesses already here are growing and expanding, and in recent years businesses have moved into the county.

"The industrial space is about full," said Commissioner Albert Abramovic, who at the beginning of February left his position in midterm to become the chief executive officer of Forward Lawrence, that county's chamber of commerce and economic development organization.

Breene noted about 19% of the jobs in Venango County are in manufacturing, far higher than the state average, and that those jobs often pay better and provide in-house training.

In the past decade, median

household income in Venango County went from about \$41,000 to about \$61,000, a "massive change even with inflation," Breene said. "Things are moving in the right direction in Venango County." Bryan noted the unemployment rate in the county is about 3.5%, as of 2023.

Though the county's population continues to drop, as there are more deaths locally than births, that decline is somewhat slowed because more people are moving into the county than are moving out, according to Breene, and Venango is "one of two or three rural Pennsylvania counties where that is the case."

Bryan said what the county needs now is new home development, and noted Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) funding, which is federal funding for rural broadband expansion, is moving forward.

About \$20 million will be invested in Venango County on broadband expansion over the life of the BEAD program, Breene said, and that Venango County got a larger amount per capita than the other counties included in the grant.

Venango is among multiple counties in northwestern Pennsylvania that partnered with the Northwest Commission to apply for BEAD funding, and about \$90.7 million was recently awarded to the region in late 2025.

The entity formed by the coalition of counties and the Northwest Commission for the broadband project, called CoreConnect, received over \$20.1 million just for Venango County. The awards are provisional until Pennsylvania gets its final approval from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, which had been expected by the end of 2025.

On another note, Breene said the new Venango County 911 Center will open this year in the repurposed former National Guard Armory in Hasson Heights.

The commissioners also said they are looking to repurpose space at Venango Regional Airport and that they plan to form an airport advisory board this year.

"There are a lot of challenges, but Venango County is in a better place than it has been in 30 years," Breene said. "Overall, the future is very bright; not like what people were saying when I was in high school. Now there are family sustaining jobs here."

"We're going to keep trudging. I feel like we are taking one step forward and two steps back. It was two steps forward and one step back."

## Bond

In August, the commissioners approved an ordinance authorizing the issuance of \$5 million in debt to pay for various capital improvements, including a new roof for the Venango County Courthouse,



File photo by Kara O'Neil

**Jeff Karns, co-founder of Side Hustle Brews and Spirits, left, shakes hands with Andrew Tabler at the grand opening of The Exchange by Side Hustle on the first floor of 100 Seneca in July.**

## Row offices, district judicial posts filled in unopposed races

BY KARA O'NEIL  
Staff writer

The November municipal election determined who will fill four county row offices for the next four years and two district judge posts for the next six years. In addition, a number of new Venango County department heads were hired in 2025.

District Attorney Shawn White, Sheriff Eric Foy and Coroner Christina Rugh all were reelected to four-year terms. The Republican incumbents faced no ballot opposition. White and Rugh, both of Franklin, started their fourth terms in January; Foy, of Cherrytree Township, began his fifth term.

A fourth row officer, Republican register-recorder Cori Sharpe, was elected to her first full term. Sharpe, who also was unopposed, had been appointed to the post in February 2025 by Gov. Josh Shapiro after Sue Hannon retired.

Franklin Police Chief Kevin Saragian, also running unopposed, was elected district judge for the Franklin area. Magisterial Court 3-3 serves the city of Franklin, Sugarcreek Borough 1 and 3, Polk Borough and Frenchcreek, Mineral, Sandy creek and Victory townships.

The District 3-3 post became vacant when former District Judge Matthew

Kirtland was elected to a Venango County Common Pleas judicial seat in 2023. Senior district judges had since been filling in.

District Judge Andrew Fish was elected to another six-year term in his district that serves the city of Oil City; Pleasantville, Cooperstown, Utica and Rouseville boroughs; Sugarcreek Borough 2 and 5; and Allegheny, Canal, Cherrytree, Cornplanter, Jackson, Oakland, Oil Creek and Plum townships. He had secured both the Republican and Democratic nominations for the November election.

## Department heads

During 2025, several new department heads joined the county as vacancies opened up.

In February, Matthew Hillyard was hired to succeed Bill Buchna as director of Venango County Regional Airport. Buchna had been director for the past nine years.

In May, Dorothy "Dottie" Tawney was appointed as chief clerk. She succeeded Bridey Shawgo, who resigned in April to take another job. Tawney previously worked in District Judge Andrew Fish's office.

Justin Davis, a major at SCI Pine Grove in Indiana County, was brought

in as the interim warden in late July from the state with Anthony Faraone continuing in the role of deputy warden after the unexpected resignations of former Warden Adam Craig and Chief Deputy Warden Tristin Siegel on July 2.

In August, Josh Sterling was promoted to executive director of the Venango County Planning Commission. Sterling worked in the county planning office for about seven and a half years as the county's community development planner prior to becoming director.

In May, Hilary Buchanan resigned as Venango County Planning Commission director. She was succeeded by Dennis Tobin, who served as director for the month of July before leaving. Sterling stepped into the position shortly after Tobin left.

Kara Kauffman took over as Two Mile Run County Park director on Oct. 27, nearly a full month after her husband and previous park director, Luke, passed away at age 46. Luke Kauffman worked at the park for more than 20 years, including six as director.

**KARA O'NEIL**, reporter for The Derrick and The News-Herald, can be reached at karaoneil.thederrick@gmail.com or 814-677-8369.

as well as upgrades to both the Venango County Prison and the new 911 Center building and its equipment.

The contract for the roof replacement was awarded in mid-May, during the commissioners public meeting, to Mid-State Roofing and Coating Inc., which is based in the State College area.

Breene told the newspaper at the time that the replacement of the courthouse roof would cost about \$1.3 million, down from the \$2 million the county previously estimated.

By the end of 2025, the new courthouse roof was finished and some upgrades at the prison also had been completed.

The remaining work is expected to be done this year.

## Budget

In December, the commissioners passed the 2026 budget with no tax increase. Taxes had been raised by a half-mill in 2024, setting the current rate of 6.5 mills.

Total revenues for 2026 are projected to be \$78,905,695,

an increase of 0.56% from the 2025 revised budget of \$78,463,101, according to a budget handout from the county.

Total expenses for 2026 are projected to be \$87,782,443, an increase of about 2.25% from 2025's expenses.

The amount to be transferred from the operating reserve fund to balance the 2026 budget is projected to be \$3,627,237.

The general fund budget, excluding Human Services, is projected to be \$23,197,701, about 26% of the entire budget expenses. The Human Services budget is balanced at \$24,926,309.

The county's debt service payment on the bond issued in 2025 is budgeted to be \$424,637. Of that, \$238,240 is principal and \$226,397 is interest.

Notably, the total amount of taxable real estate parcels in Venango County have gone up by about 6.24%, Diana Brick, the county's administrator of finance and management services, said during the December commissioners meeting, noting the number of taxable real estate parcels normally goes up only about 0.5% a year. Brick attributed the increase to new construction as well as parcels coming back onto the tax roles.

The total value of taxable real estate in the county going into 2026 is \$2,084,603,820, and the total tax-exempt real estate is valued at \$383,782,470, according to Brick, who noted the tax-exempt real estate includes churches, nonprofits, UPMC Northwest, and government and quasigovernment-owned buildings.

About 56% of the proposed general fund budget is funded through county property tax revenues, which are budgeted at \$12,845,000 for 2026. This includes a roughly \$4,000,000 increase in gross billings, according to the handout, which notes the collection rate for nondelinquent taxes is 87%.

## 2025 overview

In May, the commissioners ratified a contract with CCS Renovations Inc. at a cost of \$124,004 for renovations to the former National Guard Armory in Hasson Heights to convert it into the new 911 Center. The former armory was purchased by the county in late 2024.

Renovations took place over the course of 2025 to transform it into the new 911 center and emergency services building. 911 operations at the new site are expected to begin this year.

In June, the commissioners approved a contract with Countryside for solar installation on Venango Regional Airport property.

At the time, Breene said the proposed solar development would bring in "potentially significant" revenue to the airport and would be located on land that doesn't have much other use or potential for development. He

noted the solar installation is not costing the county any money and that all revenue generated by the installation will go to the airport budget.

Abramovic expected ground for installation to be broken next year.

Venango County Elections Director Laura Anna said turnout in the Nov. 4

municipal election hit almost 48%, which is unusually high. Four years ago, the turnout was "20-something percent."

Anna attributed the high turnout in the county and across the state to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court judge retention questions on the ballot.

Voters also roundly rejected paying a property tax to fund the Oil Region Library Association, a referendum question put to them on the ballot. A total of 9,995 (69%) no votes were cast to 4,449 (30%) yes votes.

In 2025, the Venango County Elections Office held its first "I voted" sticker contest. Emma Bauer, a fourth grader at Central Elementary School, submitted the winning design. The custom stickers appeared at polling stations on Election Day.

In November, Venango County 911 was honored by the county with a proclamation marking the center's 30th anniversary. The center began operations on Dec. 7, 1995.

**KARA O'NEIL**, reporter for The Derrick and The News-Herald, can be reached at karaoneil.thederrick@gmail.com or 814-677-8369.

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# City manager lays out Oil City's goals and priorities

*Hoovler intends to 'capitalize' on recreation, 'build' on growth*

BY KARA O'NEIL  
Staff writer

Promoting growth, taking care of Oil City's infrastructure and cleaning up blight are the 2026 goals laid out by City Manager Michelle Hoovler.

She credited the First Friday events and the Allegheny River Music and Art Festival (ARMAFest), which debuted in 2025 and will be returning in 2026, and the opening of The Exchange and a second Woods and River location in 100 Seneca for helping to draw people into the downtown.

"We are glad to work with businesses however we can," Hoovler said, noting the city is home to many great businesses, large and small.

Hoovler said she wants to work with businesses, the Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry and Tourism, and the Oil City Main Street Program to "capitalize on the natural recreation opportunities here and build on the growth underway in Oil City."

Potentially, improvements to Justus Park in the downtown also are on the horizon for 2026, she said.

The city also is in the process of updating all of the park benches and garbage cans so that they are all uniform, a grant-funded project that was the brainchild of the late Kathy Bailey, the first Oil City Main Street manager who passed away in 2023, Hoovler said.

Improvements to the exterior of City Hall, including cleaning it, also are planned, according to Hoovler.

"I work with a lot of good people; we have an excellent staff at the city," Hoovler said. "I would like to create a more cohesive environment internally."

She said the biggest challenges facing the city continue to be infrastructure costs, such as those associated with compliance of the state's lead and copper water-line demands.

Though Oil City doesn't have a problem with lead contaminating its water, under Environmental Protection Agency regulations enacted several years ago, all lead water pipes in the city must be removed and replaced between 2027 and 2037, with a certain percentage being replaced each year, an expense the city has estimated will cost over \$6 million.

Paving also continues to be a focus as the city spent over \$500,000 on it last year, Hoovler said, noting the city is planning to spend an additional \$400,000 to \$500,000 on paving this year.

Tackling blight continues to be another focus, Hoovler said. "We want people to feel like there is good housing in the city. We want people to raise their families here. It also benefits industry."

## IOOF building

Hoovler said the hope is the city will take possession of the IOOF building, also known as the Odd Fellows

building, sometime in 2026.

The city is in the process of taking the building, located at 220 to 226 Seneca St., by eminent domain from current owner Milan Adamovsky, a New Jersey resident who owns multiple properties in Oil City.

Demolition of the IOOF building and turning the space into a parking lot will support the Lyric Theatre, which is currently under renovation and located next to the IOOF building, as well as support small businesses in the downtown, Hoovler said.

The timeline for demolishing the IOOF building will be determined when grant funding for the project is lined up, according to Hoovler. She noted demolition might not take place this year.

In July, City Council approved a resolution to condemn the building by eminent domain. The eminent domain process remains ongoing.

In August, council approved a resolution authorizing the submission of a grant to help fund demolition of the building.

BKI gave the city an estimate of \$725,950 to raze it, Oil City Community Development Director Kelly Ryon said at the August council meeting. The estimate includes filling in the lot and covering it in gravel in preparation to pave the area, which is planned to become a parking lot.

Adamovsky came to Oil City around the end of 2020 and purchased five properties in a short period of time, including the IOOF building.

On April 1, 2023, a storm took part of the roof off the building, causing damage to the nearby Seneca Court building. As a result of the gaping hole in the roof, the IOOF building was condemned and has since remained in that condition.

The hole in the roof of the IOOF building remained for over a year before Adamovsky made some repairs to it after repeated pressure from the city.

In July 2023, council voted to pursue legal action in regard to what the city says is neglect to the building.

Since then, the matter has surfaced briefly from time to time at council meetings, with mentions of eminent domain, code enforcement and legal action coming up, as well as executive sessions being called to discuss the property.

## Days Inn property

At a June meeting after a brief discussion, council voted to unanimously approve a sales agreement for Nate Neely to purchase the former Days Inn property at 1 Seneca St.

The plan, Neely told the newspaper after the council meeting, was to build a nice restaurant and events venue with a big stage and a rooftop bar on a part of the former Days Inn site, leaving room for the development of a hotel in the future.

Mark Schroyer, who was the city manager at the time,

said after the meeting that the city was selling the land to Neely for \$499,000 plus closing costs, which is what the city purchased it for in 2023, and that the city was also going to cooperate with Neely on any improvements to Justus Park.

The Days Inn property deal would be a totally separate venture from Pathways Adolescent Center, which Neely also owns.

## New faces in leadership

2025 brought Oil City a new city manager and one new council member, giving Democrats a majority on council.

In September, council hired Hoovler as the new city manager after the panel accepted the retirement of Schroyer, who had been city manager for the past decade.

Hoovler had been the city's finance officer for a number of years before being promoted to assistant city manager in May 2024.

She was hired in a 4-1 vote, with Oil City Mayor John Kluck casting the dissenting vote.

Hoovler's contract, which was effective Sept. 15, runs through Sept. 30, 2027, and sets her salary at \$90,000 a year plus benefits. Beginning in 2026, Hoovler will be given 25 vacation days, four personal days and 10 sick days, according to the contract.

In the Nov. 4 election, Republican Ron Gustafson and Democrat Hillary Wisneiwski won a four-way race for two seats on council. Gustafson, the incumbent, was the top vote-getter.

Incumbent council member Dale Massie, a Republican, chose not to run for reelection.

Gustafson and Wisneiwski were sworn in at the beginning of January, joining Democrat Mike Walentosky and Republican Matthew Craig on council.

## Union contracts

During 2025, Schroyer negotiated three union contracts before his retirement.

In March, he said the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the union that represents Oil City's public works, water and sewer department employees, as well as some clerical staff, approved a three-year contract with the city (2025 to 2027).

The contract, approved by council, included a 3% increase in pay each year for three years, and that will "help the city out with employee health care," paying 10% in 2025, 12% in 2026 and 14% in 2027, Schroyer said at the time.

Negotiations were ongoing for months, as the previous IBEW contract expired Dec. 31, 2024.

In October, council approved a three-year contract with the International Association of Fire Fighters, the union representing the Oil City firefighters. The pact includes a 3% raise in 2026, a 3.5% raise in 2027 and a 4% raise in 2028, the same as the three-year contract with the union representing the Oil City Police Department.

which also was approved during 2025.

## Budget

During its final meeting of the year, council unanimously approved the city's 2026 budget with no tax increase.

The \$32,959,333 spending plan keeps the property tax levy at 13 mills, a rate set last year that translates into a tax bill of \$13 on each \$1,000 assessed valuation of taxable property.

The property tax millage for 2026 breaks down to 8.96 mills for the general fund; 2.69 mills for the operation of the city's parks, playgrounds and recreation areas; 0.97 mill for the library; and 0.38 mill to pay interest and principal on indebtedness.

The city has set aside \$180,000 in the 2026 budget to fund Oil City Library, as

the city has in other years.

The city's contribution to the Oil City Main Street program is increased by \$5,000, bringing the total city contribution to the Main Street program in 2026 to \$40,000.

City funds also are earmarked for utility/refuse services, general control, parking, liquid fuels, capital reserve, community development, the city industrial park and Oil City Arts Council.

In addition to the property tax, the budget also will rely on the \$10 per capita tax, 1% earned income tax, 1% realty transfer tax, \$52 local services tax, \$5 residence tax, and business license fees that range from \$25 to \$100.

## Year in review

Between December 2024 and February 2025, the city

issued about 200 citations to Adamovsky's LLCs due to the condition of all six of his buildings.

Besides the IOOF building, Adamovsky owns the National Fuel property, at 308 Seneca St.; 217 Seneca St.; the Grandview Estates building, at 202 Center St.; and 106 Center St., a corner building that previously housed the Rosen, Rosen and Varsek law offices. In May 2024, Adamovsky also purchased the vacant building at 302 Seneca St., which was condemned prior to him purchasing it.

After the summary trial, District Judge Andrew Fish dismissed the bulk of the citations, including those for illegal warehousing at the Grandview Estates building.

See **OIL CITY**, Page 4

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# ORA's community effort shows

*It's about the Oil Region's economic development, historic preservation, recreation and tourism*

BY HELEN FIELDING

Staff writer

The Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry and Tourism spent a good deal of 2025 developing programming and tenancy at Oil Region Venango Campus, as well as planning for long-term projects and continuing its work in economic development, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation and tourism.

"There seemed to be a lot of planning in 2025," ORA President and Chief Executive Officer John Phillips said. And "2025 really was a lot of continuing work on the heritage program, and buttoning up and finishing projects."

The ORA was formed in early 2005 from the fusion of four nonprofits: the Venango Economic Development Corporation, Oil Heritage Region Inc., Oil Heritage Region Tourist Promotion Agency, and Oil City Community Development Corporation.

Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the alliance. Its multipronged focuses include preservation of historical properties and overseeing the Oil Region National Heritage Area, supporting outdoor recreation and economic development initiatives, and promoting tourism.

The ORA is the commonwealth of Pennsylvania's designated destination marketing organization (DMO) for Venango County.

The Venango Economic Development Corporation,

originally known as the Venango County Industrial Development Corporation, formed the seed of the organization, established in 1956 when several county business people came together to address vacant commercial and industrial buildings.

Today, the ORA has 12 staff members, a 15-person board of directors and five committees. It works throughout the Oil Region, which is composed of Oil City, Franklin, Titusville, Cranberry, Emlenton and other communities.

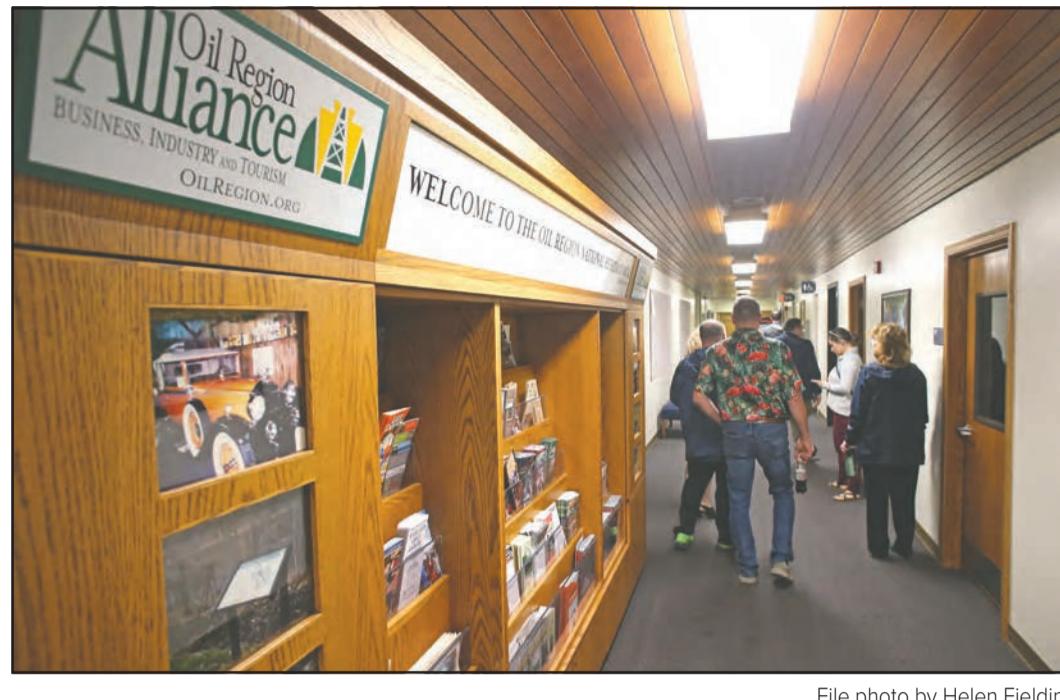
## Oil Region Venango Campus

One of the ORA's major projects of the past two years has been management and redevelopment of the former PennWest Clarion Venango Campus, now known as Oil Region Venango Campus.

The ORA took over management of the vacant university campus in Oil City in 2024, to protect donors' legacies, prevent the campus from falling into disrepair and keep ownership local.

In February 2025, Oil Region Venango Campus, managed by Seth Herrick, also acquired and incorporated the former Venango Catholic High School next door after it closed in the summer of 2024.

The vision and goals for the campus, as outlined in an ORA pamphlet about the campus, are to "maintain a multifaceted rural development hub" creating opportunities for



File photo by Helen Fielding

**In May, attendees at a public tour and listening session for the future of Oil Region Venango Campus walked down the hallway of Frame Hall, which has large-windowed classroom spaces that may be rented. The Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry and Tourism manages the campus.**

residents in areas like arts, heritage, recreation and personal development, and to "build a workforce development ecosystem."

One of the remarkable things about the campus, Phillips said, is how active it has been even without advertising. "We added a lot of tenants in 2025, and we haven't advertised anything."

New tenants include USA Choice Internet, offices of the Community Services of Venango County, the Business Innovation Center of the United Way of Venango County and Titusville Region, United Way of Pennsylvania, Venango Publishing, Nutrition Inc., Venango County Senior Center, MAPS Technologies, and some PennWest Clarion services.

Venango Technology Center's Adult Practical Nursing Program also continues at the

facility, and graduated its first cohort in June.

The ORA is pursuing private school licensure from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. And a paramedic training program with Indiana University of Pennsylvania was launched at the campus, as well, at the request of the Oil City Fire Department.

"The nice thing about the campus is that it has the technology that allows us to do these things," Phillips said.

A multitude of events were held at the facility in 2025, from youth sports to workforce development, conferences and emergency training.

Additionally, arts, music and literary events took place at the campus, including the Bridge Literary Festival, and a Trail Safety and Self Defense Training course.

"We introduced a lot of people to the campus who

hadn't been there before," Phillips said.

During 2025, the ORA also brought in a PennWest intern to start cataloguing and archiving, and digitizing the Barbara Morgan Harvey Collection in Suhr Library on campus, and the library space will be redesigned to include a secure, white-glove archive space for the collection in part of the library.

## Economic development

Economic development and redevelopment can be a slow process, Phillips said.

"So much of what we do is multi-year faceted. The hotel project was fast, but that was so out of the ordinary," he said. "This business is a marathon; not a sprint ... there's a whole lot of things that happen behind the scenes."

The "hotel project," the redevelopment of the former Days Inn hotel property in Oil

City, turned around very quickly after the ORA in collaboration with the city and the Oil City Redevelopment Authority acquired the property, demolishing the building in 2024.

In 2025, the organizations used grant funding to remove the hotel sign, base, and some curbs, trees and light poles to make the site more development-ready. The property was later purchased by Oil City businessman Nate Neely with plans of turning it into a two-story events space with a restaurant and rooftop bar.

Other properties owned and being redeveloped by the ORA include the Levi Building in downtown Oil City, purchased in 2024. Amy's Closet moved into the ground floor in 2025, and the ORA plans to commission a preservation plan for the historic building.

In March, the ORA purchased the former JM Eagle industrial site in Franklin and introduced it into its brownfield remediation program. Brownfields are former industrial and commercial locations with potential or known environmental hazards.

Other brownfields owned by the ORA are the Kraft-Dahlstrom site in Oil City and the Fuch's Lubricants site in Emlenton.

In 2026, Phillips said the ORA will be working on remediation of the Kraft-Dahlstrom site, and it will demolish the Fuch's Lubricants building in preparation for creating another development-ready waterfront site along the Allegheny.

Another economic development initiative is the marketing of industrial parks in Sandy-creek Township, Barkeyville Borough, Cranberry Township and Sugarcreek Borough.

See **ORA**, Page 5

# 100 Seneca revitalization project sees efforts pay off

BY KARA O'NEIL

Staff writer

After years of hard work, the Venango County Economic Development Authority saw its planning pay off as the building's revenue came in at over double what it had expected.

With the opening of The Exchange by Side Hustle restaurant and a second location of Woods & River Coffee on the first floor, the project to revitalize the former bank building seems to be nearing breaking even despite the fact that two whole floors still remain empty.

Looking forward, 2026 promises to be an exciting year as the imposing former bank, built in 1926, marks a century at the corner of Center and Seneca streets.

Joe Brooker, the grants and project manager for the Economic Development Authority, said he is working on plans to celebrate the 100th birthday of 100 Seneca this year, so he is looking for stories and items related to the building through the years.

After decades of use as a bank, 100 Seneca sat vacant for a number of years after the five-story, 50,000-square-foot building closed in the 1990s when the bank shuttered its Oil City branch.

The building was later

purchased by Venango County in 2017 and turned over to the Economic Development Authority in 2018.

Since then, a multi-year rehabilitation of the building, largely paid for with grants, has been undertaken to give 100 Seneca a new lease on life.

## Businesses move in

The Exchange, a restaurant and distillery, and Woods & River Coffee both moved into the first floor of 100 Seneca during 2025, filling most of that floor.

For The Exchange's grand opening, between 150 and 200 people filled the restaurant and distillery on the historic first floor of the former Oil City National Bank building on July 23. Among those attending the event were many local officials and community leaders there to celebrate the change.

The Venango County commissioners hailed 100 Seneca as a catalyst for bringing investment into Oil City, citing the opening of The Exchange as one of the main examples, alongside other nearby construction.

In late 2025, after many months of planning, Woods & River Coffee also expanded to a second location on the first floor of 100 Seneca.

The coffee shop's second

location has a focus on grab-and-go items and curbside pickup at 100 Seneca due to the limited parking in the downtown and the close proximity of the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail.

## Revenue higher than projected

According to the financial report presented in December by Diana Brick, the county's administrator of finance and management services, 100 Seneca's first year with tenants only cost the Economic Development Authority \$20,106 to operate last year — about half of the \$54,959 that was budgeted.

In addition, Brick reported that 100 Seneca brought in 205% of the rent that it had budgeted. The authority budgeted to bring in \$52,485, Brick said, but it exceeded that goal, bringing in \$107,656.

With two floors still remaining empty and taking other expenses and debts into account, the building was only running a little over \$20,000 from breaking even, Commissioner Sam Breene noted at the December meeting.

At a meeting in January, Emily Lewis, the executive director of the Economic Development Authority, said it would see additional revenue as The Exchange begins to

pay it 5% of the gross revenue of beverages sold on the premises or made there and sold elsewhere in addition to the rent it already pays for the space on the first floor.

## Several other milestones

Several smaller milestones were also reached in 2025.

In January, the Economic Development Authority held its first monthly meeting on the fifth floor conference room of 100 Seneca, where it has been meeting ever since.

In September, the Economic Development Authority members welcomed Brooker as the authority's new grants and project manager, a newly created position partially funded by a McElhattan Foundation Capacity Building grant.

Also in September, the authority launched a new website for 100 Seneca — 100seneca.com.

## Makerspace

The makerspace continues to draw interest from members of the community, Lewis said, noting that many people have offered to donate equipment for the makerspace or teach classes.

Over the course of 2025, the question of expanding the makerspace either to the third

floor or to a space in the back of the fifth floor surfaced periodically at authority meetings, with the goal established of expanding the makerspace to the third floor. That conversation is continuing into 2026.

Grant funding would need to be secured to build out the third floor into habitable space, with restrooms and utilities, Lewis told the board in 2025. Grant requests to fund that buildout have already been submitted by the authority as it works to line up funding for that project, Lewis said. Currently, the makerspace is housed in a smaller room on the fifth floor.

Brooker said there has been discussion of expanding the makerspace on the fifth floor while waiting for funding and construction on the third floor, which could take awhile.

## Still space for more tenants

With the first floor nearly full, Lewis said the authority was still looking for tenants for the fourth floor and some space on the third floor, as well as a back space on the second floor that is suitable for banquets. She said the authority members envision the fourth floor as office space.

Ideally, Brooker said the authority was looking for one

anchor tenant to fill the fourth floor. Lewis added that it was also open to having multiple tenants and can customize building out that floor.

Brooker said the co-working space on the fifth floor where people can rent a desk for a day or less is also in the works, and they were hoping to start getting tenants there this year.

The co-working space could meet the needs of someone working from home who wanted to get out of the house and into a more professional setting a few days a week, or someone traveling through the area who needed a place to work remotely while they are in the area, Lewis said.

The fifth floor conference room is also available for rent, and there is one private office available as well, Lewis said.

"It's been fun collecting stories and seeing pictures. It puts into perspective how much the downtown has changed and how many buildings we have lost. It's a good reminder of how significant what we are doing in saving this building," Lewis said.

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Also in June, council awarded the 2025 street paving contract to Shields Asphalt Paving Inc., of Valencia, which submitted the lowest bid at \$585,271.

In July, council passed an ordinance prohibiting low-level drug possession, including possession of small amounts of marijuana and drug paraphernalia.

A person may only be charged under the ordinance twice in a five-year period, with all subsequent violations being charged under federal or state law, the ordinance said.

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## Oil City

Continued from Page 3

In April, Oil City filed a civil suit against Oil City LLC, one of the six LLCs in the city owned by Adamovsky, for illegal warehousing at the Grandview Estates building. The lawsuit was withdrawn due to questions of jurisdiction after lawyers from both sides conferred with Fish at the end of May.

In June, council proclaimed June 9 as "Jackson Dilks Day," honoring Dilks for his academic achievement and civic engagement as a member of Junior Council. Dilks graduated from Oil City Area High School as valedictorian and went on to attend Columbia University.

# 2-day Drake conference still fuels local and global interest

BY KARA O'NEIL

Staff writer

In marking its fourth appearance in the region, the Drake Energy & Climate Security Conference in October drew a wide spread of industry experts and policymakers for a two-day forum that covered everything from local oil history to globe-spanning energy issues.

The 2025 conference theme — “Where now for the ‘Energy Transition?’” — focused on the “future of energy and environmental security.”

The conference got underway in 2022 with the goal of bringing experts together to discuss current issues impacting energy and climate security, as well as to remember the rich history the area holds as the birthplace of the American oil industry.

The event was cofounded by Andrew Tabler, a 1990 Oil City Area High School graduate who is a former U.S. official, Middle East expert and author.

On day one, attendees toured locations across Oil City and heard presentations on a variety of topics at Oil Region Venango Campus, 100 Seneca and the National Transit Building.

Titusville native Steven Burns, the Institute for Security and Technology’s vice president of energy and national security, started things out before he began moderating the first panel on Oct. 13 at Venango Campus.

He introduced the conference as a chance to not only



File photo by Jamie Hunt

**U.S. Reps. Mike Kelly, R-16th District, and Glenn Thompson, R-15th District, participate on a panel during the Drake Dialogues at Oil Region Venango Campus in October. Moderating the discussion is Elizabeth Stelle, director of policy analysis for the Commonwealth Foundation.**

remember the history of the area, but as a way to look to the future of the energy industry.

Orphaned wells, current U.S. energy policy and data centers were among the topics of discussion among the panelists.

After lunch at the Belles Lettres Club, attendees went to the National Transit Building, where discussion turned again to the evolving landscape surrounding data centers, as well as the massive volume of energy needed to run them.

After discussions of policy and the future, Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry and Tourism Heritage Program Manager Abigail

Watson Popescu returned the “Drake Dialogues” to their present efforts to preserve the legacy of the area as the center of the energy industry.

The evening concluded with a trip to Venango County Museum, where visitors and locals glimpsed into the region’s vibrant and varied past, followed by dinner at The Exchange, with industry leaders, policymakers and experts walking across the same ground where the Oil City Oil Exchange coordinated trade across the world over a century ago.

The conference wrapped up the next day, Oct. 14, at Drake Well Museum and



File Photo

**Mike Sommers, right, president and chief executive officer of the American Petroleum Institute, is delighted after lighting a “yellow dog lantern” at Drake Well Museum during the Drake Dialogues in October. He receives applause from conference organizer Andrew Tabler.**

Executive Officer Mike Sommers gave the keynote address.

The bulk of the day was composed of six panel discussions, many of which focused on the dramatic increase in energy demands in large part driven by data centers and AI, as well as the opportunities created by AI and the increase in U.S. natural gas production.

Later in the afternoon, Liberty Resources President and CEO Mark Pearson gave the “Drake Address.”

During the afternoon, Tabler and Venango County Commissioner Sam Breene surprised Drake Well site administrator

Michael Knecht with a “2025 Yellow Dog Award” in recognition of his partnership in making the event a reality from the first year.

Under the leadership of Knecht, who is retiring in April, Drake Well Museum has hosted one day of the forum each year since its inception in 2022.

After the sessions, attendees hopped aboard the Oil City & Titusville train for a ride into Titusville, where they had dinner at Iron Works.

Attendees who returned to the conference included Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, former national security adviser, Washington Institute; Michael Ratner, international energy lead with the Congressional Research Service; Victoria Coates, senior fellow with The Heritage Foundation and former national security adviser; and Brenda Shaffer, an energy expert and professor at the U.S. Naval Post-Graduate School.

A number of invitees new to the conference in 2025 included officials from Saudi Arabia and the European Union Commission in Washington, D.C.

Others attendees included representatives from industry, a variety of experts and several legislators from Pennsylvania.

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Contributed photo

**In July, the Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry and Tourism celebrated the completion of the new Oil Region Gateway Sculpture on Route 8 near Titusville with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.**

things as a rural development hub organization is that we help a lot of other municipalities and nonprofits.”

The ORA provided technical assistance to the recently formed Oil Region ATV Association, which in 2025 piloted its county-level ATV program to allow permitted ATVs to be ridden legally on certain designed roads in the county.

Additionally, the ORA oversaw the \$500,000 rehabilitation of the Sportsman Bridge of the East Branch Trail in Crawford County, part of the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail, and Phillips noted the ORA does a lot of grant-writing and administration for the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Alliance.

“We help multiple nonprofits that are 100% volunteer,” he said. “One of our

In tourism, the ORA continued work as the Designated Destination Marketing Organization in the county and, in addition to marketing the Oil Region in the state tourism guide, also supported many local events.

One such was the second annual Kayak Adventure Series fishing tournament, the finale of which was held in Franklin in 2025.

“If you do not keep your historic buildings and downtown buildings, your community loses its uniqueness,” Phillips said.

Career and workforce development at Oil Region Venango Campus will be a major focus as part of economic development, he said. “We have companies looking to grow, but they can’t do that without a workforce ... Development for skilled trades is a very huge need. It’s one of the huge pivotal reasons we chose to save the campus as a regional asset.” ORA also supports entrepreneurship.

And “We’ll continue to

strengthen partnerships,” Phillips said. “We can’t attract people to the area if we’re siloed and competing against each other.”

## Ahead in 2026

Coming up, “I anticipate some property sales, some of our industrial properties,” Phillips said. “Some of our local companies are potentially expanding. I can’t say who yet.”

The ORA also is seeking a solution for the preservation of the historic Wye Bridge in Oil City.

Another major focus in 2026 continues to be the preservation of buildings and preventing them from falling into disrepair, as well as seeking local ownership.

“We may have to scale back the celebration, but we’re certainly going to celebrate,” Phillips said.

The ORA helped coordinate the painting of Venango County’s “Bells Across PA” bell as part of the America 250 celebration. Oil City artists are painting both the Venango County and Forest County bells.

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# Venango Area Chamber of Commerce: Strengthening Business and Community

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Venango Area Chamber of Commerce is a membership-based organization dedicated to building, serving and promoting regional business. Proudly representing more than 450 member businesses and organizations, the Chamber continued initiatives in 2025 that strengthen the local economy while delivering meaningful value to its members across Venango County.

Chamber membership offers a range of business benefits, including Business After Hours mixers and ribbon cuttings, workshops and lunch-and-learns that address current issues, all of which serve as excellent opportunities to make meaningful professional connections with other members, community leaders and resources.

In 2026, the Chamber also plans to bring back membership orientations, giving new members a stronger foundation for maximizing their investment and engagement.

## Celebrating Community Events

The Chamber's signature events continue to highlight the vibrancy of the region. The Annual Dinner, to be held February 25, 2026, at Cross Creek Resort, will honor Warren Thomas as the 2025 Citizen of the Year, Woods & River Coffee as 2025 Business of the Year and the Venango Museum of Art, Science & Industry as 2025 Partner in Business of the Year.

The Annual Golf Outing, hosted at Wanango Golf Club, once again featured a trade show, outdoor steak dinner and prize games, with the 2026 outing scheduled for June 25.

Community festivals also remained a priority. The Oil Heritage Festival, themed Timeless Tunes in 2025, celebrated regional history through music, with plans underway for 2026 including evening concerts in Justus Park, the area's largest parade and more.

The Cranberry Festival returned this year as well, beginning with a parade hosted by the Cranberry Small Business Association and followed by a day of crafts and vendors, a car show, live music and free children's activities at the Cranberry Mall. The 2026 festival is scheduled for Sept. 19.

## Leadership and Workforce Development

Leadership and workforce development remain pillars of the Chamber's strategic plan. Alongside ongoing programs such as FLEX (Future Leaders & Entrepreneurs Exchange), Leadership Venango and VenangoREADY, the Chamber co-hosted the inaugural Youth Leadership Summit in April 2025. Nearly 100 high school students participated in a full-day retreat focused on teamwork, problem-solving and regional collaboration. Planning is underway for the 2026 event.



## Shining a Spotlight on Members and Community

The Chamber continues to highlight the strengths of its members and communities through the Be Here Initiative. In 2025, the initiative launched a new community calendar to dynamically share events and activities for residents and visitors. The calendar is available at [venangoplays.org](http://venangoplays.org).

The Chamber also publishes VenangoWorks!, a 20-page monthly newsletter featuring content for and by member businesses, with a circulation of nearly 550 printed copies and 1,800 electronic recipients. The newsletter is also available online at [venangochamber.org](http://venangochamber.org).

## Upcoming Events

- Annual Dinner: Feb. 25, 2026
- Oil Heritage Festival: July 22–26, 2026
- VenangoREADY Educator Expo: April 9, 2026
- Cranberry Festival: Sept. 19, 2026

## Strengthening Chamber Operations

Two significant staffing changes in 2025 further strengthened Chamber operations. Hannah Plowman joined the team in May as the workforce and education coordinator, expanding capacity to support education and workforce initiatives. Additionally, Kat Thompson was promoted from membership and education coordinator to vice president, recognizing her leadership and continued impact across Chamber programs.

The Chamber team includes President Susan Williams, Vice President Kat Thompson, Executive Assistant Tessa Byham, Be Here Program Manager Ashley Zaccari, and Workforce and Education Coordinator Hannah Plowman.

"Building strong relationships is at the core of our work. By understanding the needs of our members, we're able to deliver impactful programs and services," Williams said.

Serving as 2026 Chamber officers are Dan Flaherty — Oil Region Library Association (Chair), Kate Whiting — Schake Industries (Vice Chair), Seth Herrick — Oil Region Alliance (Secretary), and Ann Richar — Richar, Trinch & Co. PC (Treasurer). A full list of the Board of Directors is available at [venangochamber.org/our-team](http://venangochamber.org/our-team).

## Advancing Economic Development

With a focus on programs that create lasting impact, the Chamber remained committed to its core services while exploring new opportunities to advance the region. One such effort included the completion of a feasibility study for Justus Park, providing community leaders and developers with data and public input that may inform future development of Oil City's riverfront.

## Stay Connected

The Chamber keeps members and the public informed through its monthly VenangoWorks! newsletter, website and social media channels. Businesses and organizations interested in joining the Chamber's mission are encouraged to visit [venangochamber.org](http://venangochamber.org), email [chamber@venangochamber.org](mailto:chamber@venangochamber.org), or call 814-676-8521.



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Join us April 9 at 6 p.m. at Rhoades Auditorium for a talk by Stephanie Gorton, author of *Citizen Reporters: S.S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, and the Magazine That Rewrote America*.

[OilRegion.org](http://OilRegion.org) | 814.677.3152

# Venango County Makerspace moves forward as a nonprofit

*Expansion to third floor of 100 Seneca for added options going forward*

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Venango County Makerspace reached several organizational milestones in 2025, including the receipt of nonprofit status and the appointment of an official board of directors. These developments have allowed the organization to begin designing its permanent home on the third floor of the 100 Seneca building in downtown Oil City.

Throughout 2025, the Makerspace hosted various maker-related meetups in its temporary facility on the building's fifth floor. These initial gatherings generated community interest and provided a foundation for the planned full-scale expansion.

To keep the community informed of its construction progress, the Makerspace plans to launch a newsletter in 2026 and provide regular updates via social media. Interested residents can follow the project on the Venango County Makerspace Face-



book page or visit the organization's website at [100seneca.com/makerspace](http://100seneca.com/makerspace).

The organization will consolidate its previous craft-specific meetups into a single monthly open house. Specific dates for these events will be announced as the 2026 schedule is finalized.

The 100 Seneca building, the tallest structure in Oil City and a former oil-boom bank, is being transformed into a collaborative ecosystem for entrepreneurs and creators. The Makerspace is a central component of this economic development project, which also includes coworking spaces and a first-floor food hall.



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## ARTS Oil City: Creatives drive community revitalization

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

ARTS Oil City remains focused on leveraging the visual, performing and literary arts as a catalyst for community revitalization and economic development. The program markets Oil City nationally as a premier destination for creative professionals seeking affordability, a small-town atmosphere and accessible natural recreation.

Housed within the Oil Region Alliance and supported by the City of Oil City, the program is led by Barbara Pierce. Pierce, who relocated to Oil City from Portland, Oregon, in 2016, has served as an artist advocate for three and a half years. She draws on two decades of experience in corporate design, product development and nonprofit arts management to enhance local revitalization efforts.

Oil City's welcoming artist community continues to anchor a culture of connection. Several recent initiatives and plans for 2026 highlight the program's trajectory.

#### Artist Relocation: A National Model

Oil City's artist relocation program is among the most recognized in the country. Since its inception, more than 100 creative professionals — including writers, musicians and craftspeople — have moved to the area.

In 2025, internationally known luthier Daniel Yost joined that number. Yost first visited Oil City in early 2024, spending more than a year exploring the area before purchasing a home last fall. Originally from Argentina where he served as a music teacher and choir lead, Yost honed the craft of making historical stringed instruments after studying with a master in Spain.

After living in Syracuse and Buffalo, New York, for a decade, Yost sought a community where he could



settle into a more intimate role, similar to his experience in Argentina. Now established in Oil City, Yost is setting up his workshop and resuming commission projects.

Seeking to engage with his new neighbors, Yost participated in Artists Sunday 2025. He invited a colleague, Pedro Sperb of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, to join him. Together they displayed educational instruments at the National Transit Building and demonstrated medieval instruments Yost had crafted for Sperb.

"Daniel is a great addition to the Oil City community," Pierce said. "He brings something completely new and fits right into the creative energy here. Like those of us who work full-time in our creative professions, Daniel will be busy in his shop creating custom instruments for clients nationwide. But he also has a sincere desire to share his talents, especially with youth and the elderly."

In 2026, ARTS Oil City will continue hosting creatives researching potential moves. With anticipated grant funding, the program plans to launch a national advertising campaign targeting young emerging artists and mid-career professionals.

#### The National Transit Building Studios

Since 2023, ARTS Oil City has managed the second-floor studios in the National Transit Building, owned by the Oil City Civic Center. Under this leadership, studio occupancy has increased from 50% to nearly 100%.

"Having affordable downtown



studios is important to the creative community," Pierce said. "The artists' presence is also valuable to the historic Transit Building, as they regularly attract new customers. Arts enthusiasts also tend to be historic preservation enthusiasts."

Pierce noted that these professionals also contribute significantly to the downtown economy by frequenting local restaurants and coffee shops and attracting out-of-town visitors who shop locally.

Public opportunities to visit with Transit Studio artists will continue throughout 2026. Supporters should mark their calendars for the Summer Artist Open Studios, held the first Friday of each month from May through September (5 p.m. to 9 p.m.). National Artists Sunday is scheduled for Nov. 29.

Creative professionals interested in renting a studio must complete an application process to join the Transit Studio Artists Association.

#### Artists Sunday: A National Day of Art

For four years, ARTS Oil City has coordinated local participation in Artists Sunday, a nationwide event

held the Sunday after Thanksgiving. The goal is to highlight creative professionals during the busiest holiday shopping weekend of the year.

The event has grown annually, with businesses on the North and South sides hosting pop-up galleries. Last year, a partnership with PennWest Edinboro allowed college art students to participate and sell their work.

The City of Oil City has issued a proclamation designating the day to support the arts. "I urge all residents to support artists all year round, but especially on Artists Sunday," Mayor John Kluck said. "Oil City celebrates our local creative professionals and the contributions they make."

#### Investing in Young Creatives

As Oil City evolves, it is seeing increased interest from young people, both those raised locally and those moving from out of state. While the relocation program initially attracted late-career professionals, the rise of remote work has made it easier for young performers and artists to live away from major metropolitan centers.

In the summer of 2025, ARTS Oil City offered its first dedicated intern-

ship through the McElhattan Grant Internship Program. Lanie Franklin, a graduate of Cranberry High School and a student at PennWest Edinboro, was selected for the position.

During her internship, Franklin developed new wayfinding and artist directory signage for the National Transit Building and assisted with the First Friday street festivals. She also launched a marketing project titled "Artist Spotlights," interviewing local creators to highlight their work.

Franklin's contributions were recognized by faculty at Edinboro, leading to her recruitment for events showcasing regional job opportunities. Her internship was extended through the fall term, during which she worked remotely on graphic design projects for Artists Sunday.

PennWest has approved ARTS Oil City for another McElhattan Grant Internship in the summer of 2026. Applications are currently being accepted through the school's Handshake system for students studying fine art, design, illustration, or arts marketing.

#### Supporting the Local Arts

ARTS Oil City encourages residents to support the local creative economy through several avenues:

- Shop local galleries:** Visit the Transit Art Gallery and Gifts (TAGG) for original art and handmade crafts.

- Attend open studios:** Meet artists during First Friday events or by appointment.

- Engage with the MAC:** Participate in exhibits and classes at the Music, Arts and Culture Center.

- Start small:** For those new to collecting art, start with smaller pieces and learn about the artists' inspirations over time.

For more information, contact Barbara Pierce at [bpierce@oilregion.org](mailto:bpierce@oilregion.org) or 814-677-3152, ext. 105.

## Friends of Oil Creek State Park marks 20 years of stewardship

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

#### Improvements and Milestones

In 2025, Friends of Oil Creek State Park continued strengthening its support for the park through expanded volunteer engagement and planning for improved accessibility. FOCSP volunteers remained involved in maintenance and stewardship of park assets, ranging from trail work to environmental projects. Volunteers help maintain hiking trails, supporting these efforts with hands-on labor and funding for tools and materials.

One of the most significant shifts for 2025 was an emphasis on the ADA Accessibility Project. This initiative aims to make portions of the park more welcoming for people with physical disabilities by improving access. While the terrain at Oil Creek State Park is naturally rugged, this project represents movement toward greater inclusivity for all visitors.

Communication efforts also increased in 2025. Newsletters acknowledged and thanked returning and new members while sharing updates about volunteer roles and park improvements. New board member postings helped create more traffic and engagement on the group's Facebook page. These communications keep the community informed and engaged with park activities and stewardship opportunities.

Through enhanced volunteer programs, accessibility planning and strengthened communication, 2025 marked a year of progress for the Friends



of Oil Creek State Park.



park facilities, picnic areas, day-use areas and trail access points more accessible to visitors with mobility challenges. Ongoing collaboration with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and community partners aims to make these improvements a reality.

Volunteer opportunities will continue to be a core area of growth. FOCSP plans to schedule regular workdays for trail maintenance crews, such

as the Over the Hill Gang and seasonal volunteers, ensuring that the Gerard Hiking Trail and other systems remain safe and well-maintained. Volunteer roles related to wildflower gardens, visitor center support, environmental education and special events will be sustained to attract a wider range of participants.

The organization also intends to seek grant funding to support park projects, including signage, interpretive materials and facility improvements. These grants could support both trail enhancements and educational resources that deepen visitors' connection to the park's natural and cultural heritage.

Outreach and engagement efforts will continue through monthly public board meetings, newsletters, social media and community events. Increasing the visibility of volunteer opportunities is expected to grow membership and foster public involvement.

#### What's New

The board, spearheaded by Rebekah Deal, is undertaking a cleanup project for historic cemeteries in the park. Some of these headstones date back to the 1800s. Brian Flores, assistant park manager of Monroe State Park, educated the team on the dos and don'ts of headstone maintenance. All equipment and cleaning supplies have been purchased.

In 2025, the Friends group increased its community presence by hosting informational tables at local markets and May Mart. In 2026, the organization plans to attend additional community events to build awareness and encourage membership.

In addition, the group supports the production of interpretive brochures, educational materials and historical displays. These materials, available online and in print, enrich the visitor experience and deepen appreciation of the park's history and ecology.

#### Looking Back

Friends of Oil Creek State Park was formed in 2005 as a nonprofit chapter of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation to support the park through community engagement, stewardship and financial support for projects outside the DCNR budget.

From its early days, FOCSP has rallied volunteers and financial resources to extend the park's capacity for conservation. Volunteer groups like the Over the Hill Gang have been central to this mission, maintaining the 36-mile Gerard Hiking Trail and assisting with cross-country ski trails and wildflower gardens.

Over the years, the Friends have funded equipment, materials, brochures, interpretive signage and playground equipment. In 2025, the organization marked 20 years of volunteer service, a milestone reflecting the sustained participation of members who have helped shape the park's recreational and environmental landscape.

# Growing crowds, big plans at Drake Well Museum

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

It was another great year for Drake Well Museum and Park in 2025, as visitation over 18,000 visitors travelled to the museum and its outdoor acreage. The Museum's Free Admission and Transportation Program for schools brought in 2,599 school students, which was over 700 more than the previous school year. Events were also well attended, bringing in over 1,900 visitors.

Drake Well Museum also continued to see improvements and updates throughout 2025, particularly in its new outdoor exhibit, "The Business of Oil." The exhibit's primary feature will be the new blacksmith and cooper shop, expected to open in 2026. The shop will provide educational demonstrations of how the two trades were conducted in the 19th century Oil Region and their importance to the early oil industry.

The museum revitalized its Outreach Program in 2025 with the hiring of new Outreach Coordinator John Hetrick in May. Hetrick is working full-time and employed by Friends of Drake Well, attending multiple events throughout the summer including Titusville's Oil Festival and the Crawford County Fair. The purpose of the program is to promote Drake Well Museum to potential visitors and tour groups, encouraging them to come to the site and learn about Pennsylvania's important role in the early oil industry.

Historic Pithole City, administered by Drake Well Museum, also had a successful season, with small historic demonstrations held at the site throughout the summer including copper smithing, wood carving, spinning and weaving. Pithole ended its Summer 2025 season with a total of 639 visitors, a 25% increase from the previous year.

### Plans for 2026

The new year promises to bring even more visitors to Drake Well Museum, with a calendar of great events, some of which will coordinate with America's 250th celebration. Major events include Wisdom & More Lecture Series in March, Oil Creek 5 & 13 Stacked Trails Races in May, Drake Day and the Drake Well Marathon in August, Fall Gas Up and Oil Boom Historic Dinner in September and Pithole Lantern Tours in October. More details including dates can be found at [www.drakewell.org/events](http://www.drakewell.org/events).

Progress will also continue with site improvements, starting with new interpretive signage for the outdoor exhibits and pathways. The project is a designated Keystone Project through the PHMC. Another Keystone Project for 2026 is the rehabilitation of the Drake Well train depot, used by the Oil Creek & Titusville Railroad.

Improvements will also be made at the trail-head area located in the Jersey Bridge parking lot, which features trailheads for the Gerard Hiking Trail of Oil Creek State Park, the recreational trail of Oil Creek State Park and the Queen City Trail of Titusville. Working with Oil Creek State Park and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, plans are being created to install a crosswalk on Drake Well Road to connect the Queen City Trail with the Oil Creek State Park Trail. In addition to the crosswalk, stop signs, crosswalk signs, and other appropriate safety signs are being planned to alert motorists, cyclists and walkers of the trail crossing.

An expansion of the edge of the entryway



to the Jersey Bridge parking lot is also being considered to create a separate lane for cyclists and walkers. The project is being funded by Friends of Drake Well.

### New items

A new issue of the OilField Journal, published by Friends of Drake Well, was released in January 2026. It features five different articles on topics including the Pennsylvania Grade Crude Oil Association, Franklin Tarbell (father of Ida Tarbell), Coreco of Oil City and oil historian Paul Giddens. The Journal is funded through a grant from the Elizabeth S. Black Trust, administered by PNC Charitable Trusts. To obtain a copy or to submit an article for consideration in future issues, contact the Museum at 814-827-2797 or [rdrakewell@pa.gov](mailto:rdrakewell@pa.gov).

### Other events:

From April through September 2026, Drake Well Museum will host part of a traveling exhibit entitled "Seeing Double: Stereo Photography, Historical Cartography and the US Industrial Revolution 1840-1920." The exhibit was

originally featured at the Royal Geographical Society in London in 2023. Drake Well will host the portion focused on the oil industry.

Drake Well Museum and Park will also host the 2026 Penn-Del ISA Tree Climbing Competition in May. Details are still being confirmed, but more information on the Penn-Del Chapter of the ISA can be found at [www.penndelisa.org/](http://www.penndelisa.org/).

### Looking back

Located off Route 8 south of Titusville, Drake Well Museum and Park is administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) in partnership with nonprofit Friends of Drake Well, Inc. The two entities also partner in the administration and operation of Historic Pithole City near Pleasantville, and McClintock Well #1, located between Oil City and Rouseville.

Friends of Drake Well, Inc., works to support Drake Well Museum in achieving its mission to uncover, preserve and share Pennsylvania's rich

petroleum history, connecting past to present through a diversity of perspectives and inspiring its global audience to strive for a sustainable energy future.

Drake Well Museum and Park first opened to the public in 1934. The site encompasses 240 acres, including the original location of the oil well drilled by Edwin L. Drake on behalf of the Seneca Oil Company in 1859. The well was the world's first commercially successful oil well, igniting an industry that is now a global enterprise.

Drake Well Museum is open year-round to visitors, with reduced hours of operation during the winter months. Hours from Nov. 1 through April 1 are Friday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; after April 1 the hours change to a five-day schedule operating Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Historic Pithole City's Visitor Center is currently closed for the winter season but will reopen June 6, remaining open Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. until Aug. 30.

## Ex-Days Inn site will spring to life Work on restaurant and events venue to begin when weather breaks

### BY KARA O'NEIL

Staff writer

The site of the former Days Inn on Seneca Street in Oil City, adjacent to Justus Park, is slated for transformation with a restaurant and events venue due to go up in spring.

Plans to develop a restaurant on the site call for creation of a two-story events venue with a restaurant and rooftop bar, proposed by Oil City businessman Nate Neely. The Days Inn property development is a totally separate venture from the Pathways Adolescent Center, which Neely also owns.

The plan is to break ground for the events venue as soon as the weather breaks, Neely said, and that about three weeks of work will need to be done before steel for the building goes up. He noted there was a delay in getting the steel framing, pushing the construction date into spring.

His hope is to have the steel skeleton of the building up in April.

The goal is to open the

restaurant and events space in September or October, he told the newspaper. He estimated the entire events venue and restaurant will seat about 500 people.

The second floor will feature a mezzanine with seating for people to look over the first floor, Neely said.

Above the second floor will be the rooftop bar, which will be two-thirds enclosed with large garage doors so that it can be used year-round, he said. The rooftop bar will be about 32 feet from the ground.

The plans also call for an outdoor patio off the first floor and a deck attached to the second floor, Neely said, and there will be plenty of outdoor seating. A glass elevator in the corner of the building, going from the first floor to the rooftop bar, will be lit up.

"We are in preliminary sketches and talks for the hotel development, which will eventually happen on the site," he said. "I think that is the piece that will tie it all together."

The first phase of the devel-

opment is the restaurant and events venue with a rooftop bar, Neely told the newspaper in September when the plans were approved by the Venango County Regional Planning Commission. He is looking for grant funding sources or investors to partner with to build a small hotel for the second phase of development.

In June, Neely purchased the property at 1 Seneca, the site of the former Days Inn, for \$499,000 plus closing costs, which is what the city purchased it for.

Prior to selling the property to Neely, the Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry and Tourism obtained a demolition grant and partnered with the city to demolish the dilapidated hotel, which had been closed since 2019.

KARA O'NEIL, reporter for The Derrick and The News-Herald, can be reached at [karaoneil@the-derrick.com](mailto:karaoneil@the-derrick.com) or 814-677-8369.

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## Century Arts: Pierce, Hurley continue living artfully

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Local artists and designers Barbara Pierce and CJ Hurley continued to strive to bring their mission of "Artful Living" and personal design touches to their clients in 2025. For the duo, 2026 looks like a year of returning to form with a new residential wall mural in the works.

Barbara Pierce, designer and manager of Century Arts Design and Fine Art Studio, says the project began in the fall of 2025. "On a project visit in the Washington, D.C., area, our clients mentioned the desire to have CJ paint one of his custom designed friezes for their home," Pierce said.

CJ and Barbara spent 2018–2020 helping this same couple design their custom-built Arts and Crafts-style home. Since its construction, they have helped refine the interior down to its last detail. "After designing all of the major and minor trim elements, the home's colors and wallpapers, the hardware, tile and lighting, and planning the arrangement of antique leaded glass and other architectural features, a hand-painted mural is the icing on the cake," Hurley added.

With this project, which could be years in the making, the couple will be getting back to their early roots. It was Hurley's hand-painted frieze work that initially put Century Arts Design and Fine Art Studio on the map.

"After doing a soft launch of our business highlighting CJ's frieze work, we started garnering local and national attention," Pierce said. "We

were living in Portland, Oregon, and began receiving calls from journalists writing for newspapers like The Oregonian and the Seattle Times. Later, calls from national magazines like Arts & Crafts Homes and the Revival and American Bungalow started coming in."

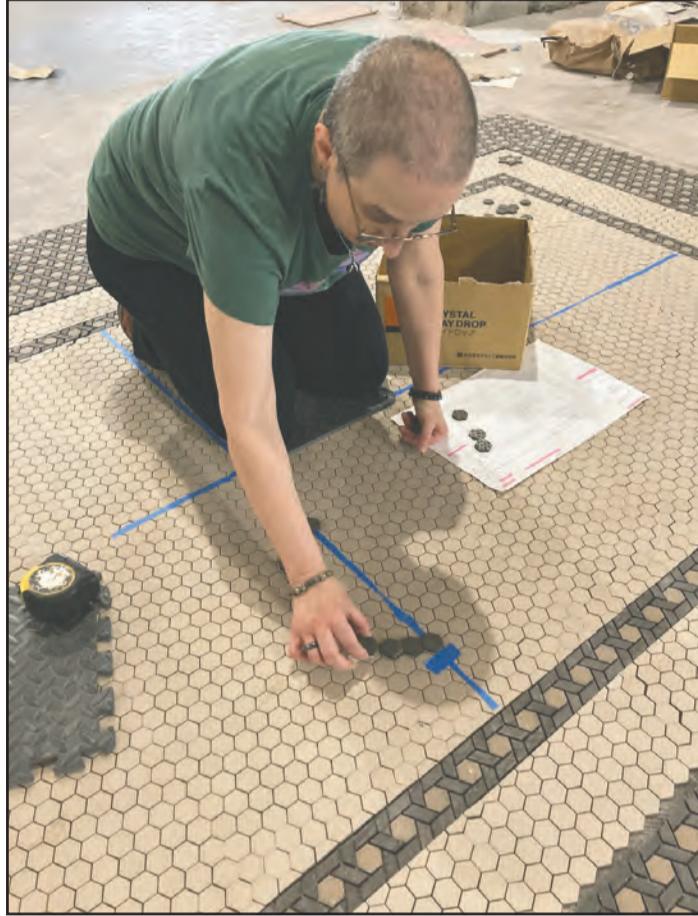
The attention reached its pinnacle when their work was featured in books dedicated to the history, preservation and cultural importance of Arts and Crafts period architecture. Architectural historian Paul Duchscherer featured Hurley's hand-painted interiors in his book, *Along Bungalow Lines*.

### Symbolist Painting and The Arts & Crafts Movement

Arts and Crafts architecture specialized in incorporating symbolic meaning as part of its construction. As an outgrowth of the Gothic Revival, it reimagined the sort of symbolism incorporated into ecclesiastical buildings, adapted to accentuate secular residential spaces.

"Really, in many ways, the decorative interior work I do is a 'dead art,'" Hurley said, noting that he was aware of few — if any — artists currently working in the specific practice.

It is ironic that the notion of "getting back to their roots" came up when it did; in a recent issue of Arts & Crafts Homes and the Revival, Pierce and Hurley were interviewed for the magazine's "The Guild" column about their origins and the first time



the magazine reached out to them years ago.

"It all feels like fate," Pierce said, "the timing of this article and our clients thinking about a custom frieze for their home. Needless to say, we are excited about the possibilities for this project!"

### 100 Seneca's Artistic Touches

Pierce and Hurley were also instrumental in the renovation and restoration of 100 Seneca in Oil City. Pierce received a call from Emily Lewis, the executive director of the Venango County Eco-

Canning Studios went into securing the main lobby's massive architectural cornice and safeguarding the decorative ceiling painting as an architectural remnant. Because the background of the ceiling was in poor shape and detracted from the decorative design, Hurley and Pierce determined that it would be best to meticulously paint around the decoration without harming it.

The investigation unveiled the ceiling's original base color, but they determined the color was too bold to accentuate the deteriorated decoration.

"We had to take a stance," Pierce said. "It would have been entirely feasible to restore the background color, but it would have detracted from the aged beauty of the intricate decorative scheme."

Ultimately, the designers and the development authority board chose an alternative color. "We gave them a color that was relatable to the original, but more sublimated," Hurley explained.

In addition to the ceiling work, the studio handled the colors for the building's main entry, second floor and adjacent rooms. The consultation eventually grew, and Pierce and Hurley were asked to design the building's main entry mosaic tile.

### Hotel Design in Oregon

Another accomplishment for Century Arts in 2025 was their work on the Lightwell Hotel in Hood River, Oregon. Originally designed by architect C.J. Crandall and built as the Waucoma Hotel, it later

became the Hotel Oregon, but by the 1970s, it had fallen into disrepair.

Known today as the Lightwell, the hotel was reimaged by a group of investors and Gabe Genauer, a colleague who had worked with Pierce and Hurley on numerous projects before.

"When Gabe called us in on the project, much of the design work was in place, but he was uncomfortable with aspects of the project that left him with the uneasy feeling that something wasn't quite right," Pierce said.

Hurley added that Genauer felt a lack of warmth in the project that the architectural team wasn't able to see. Hurley and Pierce assisted with numerous aspects of the interior spaces, making adaptations to the architect's design plans.

### Looking Ahead

The year 2026 marks 10 years for Century Arts Design and Fine Art Studio in Oil City. It also marks the 50th anniversary of the artists' guild to which Hurley belongs.

"The Roycroft has a lot planned for celebration, including special programs, exhibits, lectures and other events," Hurley said.

Locally, the pair plans to participate in the National Transit Artists Summer Open Studios on First Fridays. They will also participate in Small Business Saturday and Artists Sunday events during Thanksgiving weekend, as well as the Clifford's Carpets Makers Market in December.

## Alpacat Corral's Copper and Griffin turn 15 years old

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

At Alpacat Corral this spring, alpacas Copper and Griffin turned 15 years old. Owned by Jeanette Demmer Biltz, the two animals at 169 E. Bissell Ave. continue to be a local draw at birthday parties, festivals, church functions and area waterways.

Copper and Griffin frequently greet visitors at their front yard fence. This past year, the pair attended spring and fall Neighborhood Night Out gatherings at St. Joseph's Church, an animal blessing and a youth group event at Rockmere Boat Club. They

also took their seasonal dip in the Allegheny River.

Beyond public appearances, Alpacat Corral offers alpaca manure for sale as a rich fertilizer that does not burn plants. Business representatives state this time of year is ideal for spreading the fertilizer on gardens.

Those interested in purchasing manure should bring a five-gallon pail to fill for a small fee. For more information, the public may call 814-676-2655.

The business also offers alpaca fleece for sale by the pound, available in fawn and white.

## Creative grant helps Oil City artist grow The Melting EmPOURium



### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Mixed media artist Crystal Roser expanded operations for her small business, The Melting EmPOURium, in 2025 after receiving a professional development grant. Roser, who creates functional art using alcohol inks, resin, acrylic paint, vinyl, wood and glassware, utilized the funding to accelerate her business's growth in the Oil City region.

The expansion began after Roser developed a formal business plan through the ACRE program. She then submitted the plan to the Erie Arts Creative Entrepreneur Accelerator Program (CEAP). Following a review, Roser was awarded a grant to scale her creative enterprise. She applied the funds toward the purchase of a professional airbrushing system, a bulk supply of resin, a durable business banner and new business cards. The grant also covered the annual contract fee for her

display at Transit Art Gallery & Gifts (TAGG), where she has been a member artist since 2020.

Roser operates from a studio located on the second floor of the National Transit Building Annex on Seneca on Second Street in downtown Oil City. Throughout 2025, sales increased steadily, with alcohol ink wine glasses remaining her most frequent commissioned item. The year also included the completion of her largest custom tumbler order to date.

The business participated in several high-profile vendor events in 2025. In August, Roser exhibited at the annual Art Crawl on Butler Street in Lawrenceville, marking her first time at the event. Locally, she participated in Bridgefest on the Veterans Bridge and joined the inaugural First Fridays series on Seneca Street. For the holiday season, Roser was accepted as a vendor for the Cook Forest Gingerbread



Tour, where she sold coasters, jewelry, lazy Susans, serving boards, tumblers and glassware.

Looking toward 2026, Roser intends to use remaining CEAP grant funds to apply for Franklin's Applefest. The artist also plans to launch a dedicated e-commerce website to facilitate direct sales of her one-of-a-kind products. Digital engagement remains a focus for the business; The Melting EmPOURium Facebook page currently has nearly 1,000 followers, and the

artist documents her process on Instagram at @crystalrosen5.

Roser maintains a business mission centered on the idea that art can be functional. "Creating a piece of art that can be used in everyday life is achieved when I bring color, technique, and repurpose into making and selling my art," Roser said. She noted that her goal is to create a peaceful vibe through her work while continuing to offer unique, handmade items to the regional market.

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# FLEXing for the Future: A look back at 2025 and what's ahead

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

FLEX continued to grow with intention in 2025, focusing on creating more accessible ways for young professionals in Venango County to connect, develop and get involved. FLEX concentrated on improving how members experience the organization and how easily they can step into meaningful roles.

One of the most notable improvements came through marketing and communication efforts. FLEX held dedicated marketing strategy meetings that led to the rebuilding of its branding and content guidebook. This work helped clarify FLEX's voice, visual identity and messaging, ensuring consistency across social media, newsletters and event promotion. The updated guidebook reflects FLEX's welcoming, energetic and community-driven personality while providing a strong foundation for future growth.

Communication and visibility continued to strengthen throughout the year. The monthly FLEX Your Ideas (FYI) newsletter remained a reliable touchpoint, while social media efforts shifted toward storytelling and showcasing real member experiences, including FLEX Business Spotlights that highlight local businesses owned and operated by young professionals. This approach helped new professionals see themselves in FLEX and made it easier for first-time attendees to feel welcomed and connected.

Programming also evolved. FLEX refined its event mix to better balance social connection, professional development and community involvement. Speaker Series events were designed around real-life topics emerging leaders care about, like "Mindfulness and Stress Management," offering practical takeaways in an approachable, conversational format. Social events continued to prioritize low-pressure networking like coffee chats, lunches, social meetups and shows, helping members build genuine connections.

FLEX also celebrated individual impact through its FLEX Presents event, where Kaleb Lewis was named Young Professional of the Year. This recognition highlighted the positive contributions members are making in Venango County and reinforced FLEX's commitment to celebrating leadership, engagement and community involvement.

A year of thoughtful growth, stronger infrastructure and deeper connection set the foundation for greater impact.

## Moving into 2026

As FLEX heads into 2026, the energy is high. This year is all about making connections through experiences designed by young professionals, for young professionals. Whether someone is brand new to FLEX or has been involved for years, 2026 is about creating easy entry points to meet people, build relationships and feel part of something bigger.

The 2026 calendar features a variety of engaging, connection-driven events. Events and initiatives are being designed by young professionals with the goal of creating welcoming spaces where relationships form naturally and feel part of something bigger.



participation feels easy and inclusive. This approach allows FLEX to meet members where they are, encouraging both new and returning participants to engage in ways that feel authentic and accessible.

Planned highlights include a free bowling night and a Millennial DJ Dance Party fundraiser, blending nostalgia, community support and social energy. FLEX is also exploring a rebranded Brewfest event, building on the success of Bike 'n Brew by bringing together local brew fans, community partners and emerging leaders for a social experience rooted in local pride.

Professional and personal growth remain just as important, and FLEX will continue hosting Speaker Series events focused on real-world topics that support both career and personal development. These sessions are designed to feel like conversations rather than lectures, offering practical takeaways, inspiration and opportunities to connect with peers and local leaders.

Volunteer opportunities and committee involvement will continue to give members ways to turn connection into action. FLEX also encourages members to share ideas for events, locations and initiatives, helping local young professionals explore and experience the many great places throughout the community.

## What's new?

FLEX is coming into 2026 with a renewed sense of momentum, connection and leadership as the organization prepares for the exciting year ahead. FLEX continues to evolve with a clear focus on creating experiences for members while strengthening the foundation that supports long-term growth and engagement.

Educational programming continues to be shaped around real-life challenges young professionals face, providing practical insights while fostering conversation, confidence and peer connection. FLEX is also continuing to strengthen partnerships that support leadership development and community involvement throughout Venango County.

Another update is the transition to the 2026 FLEX leadership team. The 2026 officers include President Juliet Hilburn of Northwest Hospital Foundation, Vice President Briley Shawgo of KJ Consulting & Environmental Services LLC, Joe Brooker of Venango County Economic Development Authority overseeing membership, Tyler VanWormer of Franklin Insurance serving as development chair, Elizabeth Reiser of Lyto Nails by Liz leading marketing and



community partnerships, and Nicole Burton of UPMC WorkPartners and Maddy Bakker of Huff-Guthrie Funeral Home serving as events and fundraising co-chairs.

With engaged leadership and a sense of purpose, FLEX is entering the next year energized and ready to grow.

## A look back

FLEX Young Professionals was created with a simple but powerful goal: to attract, retain and connect young emerging leaders in Venango County by giving them a place to belong, grow and lead.

Established as a program of the Venango Area Chamber of Commerce, FLEX supports professionals age 40 and under who live or work in the region and are looking for ways to get involved in the community.

In its early years, FLEX focused on building connections through casual networking events and volunteer opportunities. These gatherings made it easier for young professionals to meet peers, build relationships and feel rooted in the area. From the beginning, FLEX recognized that connection is key to

retention and that creating a welcoming community helps emerging leaders envision a future in Venango County.

As interest grew, FLEX evolved into a more structured, volunteer-driven organization with dedicated committees and leadership roles. Signature events such as FLEX Presents became important milestones, helping FLEX celebrate together while strengthening ties between members, local businesses and community partners.

In recent years, FLEX has continued to mature with a focus on sustainability and leadership development. Expanded professional development programming, increased opportunities for involvement and a smooth transition into the 2026 leadership team reflect FLEX's commitment to long-term impact.

Today, FLEX serves as both a connector and a catalyst, helping young professionals build relationships, develop confidence and stay engaged in Venango County. By fostering community and opportunity, FLEX continues to play a vital role in shaping the region's future.

# Small Business Jump Start program returns for 22nd year this spring

## BY SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Small Business Jump Start (SBJS) program is entering its 22nd year of providing entrepreneurial training in the Venango County region. The program, which assists individuals in starting new ventures or expanding existing operations, reports a historical success rate of 87%, having helped develop and sustain more than 975 businesses since its inception.

The upcoming spring session is scheduled to begin March 10 and will be held on Tuesday evenings from 6 to 8 p.m. in Franklin for nine weeks. Gary Svetz, president of Svetz Consulting Services, LLC and lead instructor, emphasizes that while a business plan is necessary, developing the owner's individual leadership capability is equally vital.

## Veterans Entrepreneur Program offers training this spring

### Program Details

- Cost:** Free for area veterans.
- Format:** Veterans can choose to be integrated into the regular SBJS program starting March 11 or participate in a separate entrepreneurial session.

- Support:** Spouses and partners are permitted access to the sessions for support.

- Registration:** Contact the Venango County Veterans Affairs office at 814-432-9786 (ask for Karen) or Gary Svetz at 814-336-1305. Applications are also accepted at the Veterans Affairs office at 1 Dale Ave. in the Human Services Complex, or via email at [gsvetz@zoominternet.net](mailto:gsvetz@zoominternet.net).

with initial capital and cash flow.

SBJS serves participants throughout Venango, Crawford, Clarion and Mercer counties. The initiative is sponsored by a wide range of regional partners, including: Northwest Bank, County of Venango, City of Franklin, Franklin Chamber of Commerce, PMP Printing, Oil Region Alliance, Rossbacher Insurance, Seneca Printing Express, Keystone Community Education Council, FICDA, Blue Canopy Marketing, Clarion County Community Bank, Svetz Consulting Services, LLC and the Franklin Downtown Retail Association.

To register for the spring session, contact Ashley Rodgers at the City of Franklin at 814-437-1922 ext. 1131 or [arodgers@franklinpa.gov](mailto:arodgers@franklinpa.gov).

Svetz brings more than 37 years of experience in the Northwest Pennsylvania business community, including a 12-year corporate background and ownership of five business ventures. A recipient of the Pennsylvania Elite 100 entrepreneur designation, Svetz credits the program's longevity to community support, particularly the efforts of co-founder and late City of Franklin event coordinator Ronnie Beith.

The program cost of \$125

includes access to more than \$2,500 in benefits. Participants receive a sales skills resource assessment, guidance on QuickBooks software and connections to professional resources including attorneys and ac-

countants. A unique feature of the program is the inclusion of free, ongoing business coaching after the official nine-week course ends. Graduating alumni also gain access to a revolving small business loan fund to assist

# Oil City Main Street Program celebrates 14 years

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

As the Oil City Main Street (OCMS) Program concluded its 14th year in 2025, the organization continues to use strategic investment and collaboration to drive economic revitalization.

Launched in 2011, OCMS is a partnership between the City of Oil City and the Oil Region Alliance. A major 2025 milestone was securing \$100,000 in façade grant funding through Gov. Josh Shapiro's Main Street Matters initiative. To date, \$49,000 has been approved to help property owners improve building aesthetics and functionality.

The Exchange was the first business to complete a project this cycle, featuring improvements to the front, side and rear of its building. OCMS supported new signage through a 50/50 matching grant, part of a broader

effort to encourage private investment while preserving historic character.

The program continues to use events as economic drivers. In September, the inaugural Allegheny River Music & Arts Festival provided 30 hours of live music and art demonstrations. The event included a chalk walk, outdoor movie, a guided Mural and Public Art Walk and a literary celebration by The Bridge Literary Journal. Local special effects artist Kaleb Lewis debuted the first "Woodland Creature" installation, which will become an annual feature.

Plans for the 2026 festival include an outdoor recreation theme, the first Oil City Half Marathon and a family-friendly Poker Run.

Other consistent programming saw record growth in 2025. The Curb Market reached peak vendor par-

ticipation, while events like Oil City Uncorked, Music on the Square and Christmas Past remained major draws.

During Christmas Past, Seneca Street was closed for First Friday activities, featuring the "Secret Door" at Barr's Insurance and a Grinch display by Lewis.

The Samuel Justus Charitable Fund provided a \$2,018 grant for outdoor movie equipment, used for six screenings in 2025. Additionally, the Jack Rowley Charitable Trust supports Music on the Square, held in conjunction with the Oil City Arts Council, Arts Oil City and Northside businesses.

Digital promotion remains a pillar of the program. The "Meet Me on Main Street" video series has featured 150 local businesses, generating 500,000 views.

Community members near and far look to the Oil

City Main Street page for news and events happening in our area," said Stevette Rosen, OCMS manager. "It is one of the most positive Facebook pages around."

The volunteer-driven program honored several partners at its May 2025 annual meeting:

- Business Partner of the Year:** Barr's Insurance

- Ms. Main Street:** Maureen James

- Mr. Main Street:** Kevin Frawley

- Youth Volunteer Awards:** Austin Billingsley and Tyler Marcza

OCMS is currently preparing its application for re-designation with the Pennsylvania Downtown Center. A new five-year plan aims to brand Oil City as a regional destination for music and outdoor activities while decreasing commercial vacancies.



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## LEADERSHIP VENANGO

is a nine-month program of the Venango Area Chamber of Commerce designed to identify, educate, involve, and motivate individuals who desire to become more effective leaders.

Visit [leadershipvenango.org](http://leadershipvenango.org) for more information.

# Ask Me holds legacy of serving customers seeking digital solutions

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Since its inception in January 2012, Ask Me has been a steadfast ally for businesses and individuals seeking affordable, effective and personalized digital solutions. Founded and operated by Jeanne Best, Ask Me was built on a vision of empowering small businesses through communication, strategy and hands-on support. Over the past 14 years, the business has established a reputation for managing social media platforms, designing and maintaining websites, writing compelling content and training clients to confidently navigate digital tools.

Ask Me's commitment to excellence is reflected in Jeanne Best's long-standing role as a trusted writer and communicator, having authored articles for publications such as this one for nearly two decades. That consistency and reliability has helped build lasting relationships within the business community.

Beyond her work with Ask Me, Jeanne remains deeply engaged in the community through volunteerism and active involvement in local organizations, reinforcing the business's people-first philosophy.

### 2025 in Review

The past year marked a period of refinement and growth for Ask Me. As the digital landscape continued



to evolve, Ask Me focused on delivering thoughtful, results-driven solutions tailored to each client's unique goals.

Key highlights from 2025 include:

- Expanded Strategic Services:** Ask Me further integrated modern tools and technologies, including AI-supported workflows, to enhance efficiency while maintaining a personal, hands-on approach to social media management, content creation and digital strategy.

- Client-Focused Results:** Customized strategies helped clients strengthen their online presence, improve engagement and communicate more clearly with their audiences.

- Education and Empowerment:** Through one-on-one training, workshops and guided support, Ask Me continued its mission of helping clients better understand and manage their digital platforms.

- Community Commit-**

**ment:** Pro bono projects, volunteer support and collaborative efforts with local organizations remained a cornerstone of Ask Me's values, reinforcing its role as a community-minded business partner.

The Ask Me website, [www.askmebyjeanne.com](http://www.askmebyjeanne.com), reflects this growth, highlighting services designed to meet the evolving needs of small businesses.

### Looking Ahead to 2026

As Ask Me looks toward 2026, the focus is on intentional growth and alignment. Plans are underway for a strategic transition that will allow Jeanne Best to dedicate increased time and energy to Ask Me, strengthening client relationships and expanding service offerings.

The year ahead will emphasize:

- Deeper Client Support:** A focus on long-term strategy, brand clarity, and consistency.

tent messaging across digital platforms.

- Service Expansion:** Continued development of social media strategy, content planning, email marketing, analytics and performance tracking to help clients remain competitive and adaptable.

- Education & Resources:** The introduction of learning opportunities and tools designed to empower clients to confidently manage and understand their digital presence.

- Collaborative Opportunities:** Strengthening partnerships with local businesses and organizations to create integrated, supportive solutions.

These initiatives reflect Ask Me's commitment to growth that is both purposeful and people-centered, positioning the business as a trusted guide for clients navigating an ever-changing digital environment.

As Ask Me moves into 2026, its legacy as a reliable, relationship-driven digital partner remains strong. With a continued emphasis on quality, accessibility and client success, Ask Me is well-positioned for its next chapter. Jeanne Best remains committed to supporting businesses with clarity, creativity and care.

For more information or to learn how Ask Me can support your business, visit [www.askmebyjeanne.com](http://www.askmebyjeanne.com) or call/text 814-229-5479.



# Hollow Oak Press continues spinning stories with a twist

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Hollow Oak Press, LLC had a busy year in 2025. The micro-independent press added another anthology to its catalogue in fall of 2025: Short(b) Reads, a food plus fiction anthology. In addition to the new print anthology, Hollow Oak Press will also be releasing the popular series Hidden Heritage as a paperback in 2026. The articles, written by Judy Etzel with research by Kay Dawson, will be available in a newly formatted and edited paperback version, and will feature a new, never-released article.

### Looking back

Hollow Oak Press is proud to remain a paying market for new and emerging writers since 2023. The press, founded by long-time Oil City resident Amanda Pica, continues to grow and receives hundreds of submissions for each project from writers around the world. The publication team also includes Jessica Ritchey, associate editor; Austin Gray, layout editor; and Scott Richards, contributing editor.

In late 2025, Hollow Oak Press announced the submission call for their next high concept anthology due out in the fall of 2026: The Ordinary Magic in Extraordinary Tales. The project will merge cozy fantasy short fiction with personal development essays.

Each story chosen for publication will be thematically matched with an essay on centering warmth and well-being through simple, everyday acts.

Readers will enjoy lower-stakes tales and will have opportunity for reflection on how to cultivate a cozy life for themselves.

Plans for the upcoming

## Baked Goods From Heaven shifts to bakery-bistro

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Baked Goods From Heaven is marking three years in business and one full year in its current location by shifting focus toward a bakery and bistro service model. The company moved into a larger space in 2025 to support its growing operations and improve visual presentation.

Management noted that 2025 represented a transition from

"doing more to doing better." During the year, the business refined its menu, introduced seasonal features and improved internal systems while winning a trophy for the best sandwich in Venango County.

The new space supported growth we were already moving toward and gave us the ability to execute it well," the company stated. The business, which began as a

passion project, has now integrated more intentional communication and in-shop experiences to deepen community engagement.

The 2026 plan focuses on sustainable growth by maximizing the current facility. Goals for the year include strengthening the core menu and expanding specialty orders, events and seasonal offerings.

New features for custom-

ers include a rotating bakery counter, holiday specials and a weekly special board to complement the staple menu. The company stated it intends to maintain the "same heart" of the business while expanding its capabilities as a bistro.

The expansion of special orders in the coming year is intended to lay the groundwork for future scalability and more comprehensive event support.

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# VCD overcomes funding delays, sets course for growth

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Navigating through a turbulent year of government funding was not a simple task for the Venango Conservation District (VCD) in 2025. The organization faced a period where projects were placed on hold, reimbursements for district projects were delayed and overall progress on several initiatives fell behind. Despite these systemic challenges, the district marked several significant operational successes and internal growth.

The VCD expanded its team in 2025 with two key hires. Rebecca Fagley filled the open Watershed Specialist position, initially managing uncompleted tasks before evolving the role to meet current district needs. Additionally, former employee Hilary Buchanan re-joined the staff as the Dirt Gravel and Low Volume Road Technician. Buchanan spent the spring sessions learning program administration to ensure Venango County municipalities remained well-served by the initiative.

Environmental education remained a core pillar for the district throughout 2025. The VCD successfully executed several initiatives, including the Backyard Conservation Workshop, a Natives and Pollinator Garden enhancement project and the Kids on the Farm events held in cooperation with Cranberry High School. The district also hosted the annual Envirothon Competition for local students.

A major milestone was reached as the VCD completed its Strategic Planning process, the first such effort in 18 years. This process convened board members, staff and cooperating agency personnel to brainstorm and define the district's resource focus for the next three years. As part of this organizational growth, the VCD Board welcomed Larry Dunkerley as an associate director. Dunkerley brings a specific interest in agricultural conservation to the



group's monthly meetings.

Looking toward 2026, the VCD plans to build on this new strategic foundation by continuing its support of agricultural conservation and streambank stabilization. A primary focus will be providing technical assistance and funding to municipalities to improve rural roadways while reducing environmental pollution.

With funding secured from the Northwest Commission, the district will collaborate with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission to construct streambank stabilization at the Heath Oil Gas Station property on Sugar Creek in Cooperstown. The district also anticipates the completion of three agricultural projects intended to reduce pollution to Warden Run, Sugar Creek and Patchell Run.

To further these goals, the VCD is currently hiring its sixth staff member, a Nutrient Management Technician. This individual will work alongside agricultural staff to implement conservation on local farming operations. A critical component of this role involves the new hire becoming certified in Nutrient Management planning, which is essential for helping farmers reach their operational and conservation targets.

"Ultimately, the district hopes that those in need of conservation assistance will feel free to reach out to the VCD. If we don't have the answer, we'll work to find it," said Lisette Lane, district manager. Lane noted that the staff is ramping up efforts to become the premier agency for conservation in Venango County by enhancing their knowledge base and agency resources.

The 2026 calendar includes several new educational opportunities. The VCD



will implement a stormwater management demonstration rain garden project and offer educational events specifically for municipal secretaries regarding Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Chapter 102 and Chapter 105 programs.

The annual seedling sale will feature native tree and shrub species, with an added opportunity for customers to receive free tree tubes to protect new plantings. Other upcoming events include a Backyard Conservation Workshop where rain barrels will be provided at low or no cost. Additionally, the VCD will introduce formal education in the Natives and Pollinator Garden classroom, featuring outdoor afternoon teas and sessions on stream health and native plants for adults.

## Looking back

Established in 1961, the Venango Conservation District originally focused on soil conservation and the



Gypsy Moth program. Over 65 years, the staff has grown to manage complex issues including erosion and sediment control permitting, the

Black Fly Spray program, the West Nile Virus Treatment Program and invasive species control.

The district office is located

at 4871 US 322 in Franklin and is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. More information can be found at [venangocd.org](http://venangocd.org).

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## BKI sees steady growth, adds new equipment in 2025

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

It was another year of steady business for BKI in 2025. Many smaller residential and commercial projects, excavating and grading were handled, as well as the demolition of a few blighted properties in Oil City and Titusville. BKI noted an increase in the crushing and screening of sandstone for production of various grades and sizes of stone for builders and construction companies for aggregate, landscaping and drainage projects.

A new Rammer hydraulic hammer was added to the company's equipment for rock breaking and concrete demolition. Also, a new 12-foot Car Mate jobsite trailer was purchased, and a new GMC 2500 truck was added

to the fleet this year.

Originally incorporated in 1961 by Bert Klapiec — who for many years prior started with a single-axle dump truck and hauled coal for his neighbors — the North Seneca Street business is now owned by his son, Dave, and daughter-in-law, Jean Klapiec, and their sons, Chris and Nick Klapiec. Sixty-five years and three generations later, the business provides excavating and demolition services for both small residential and large industrial companies.

BKI also offers dump truck service for all aggregate needs, as well as roll-off service and heavy-haul capabilities with its four-axle lowboy, which handled many jobs this year. Due to steady business throughout the year, the company is looking to hire dump truck drivers, roll-off drivers

and equipment operators.

### 2026 Plans

**Klapiec Express:** In addition to BKI, Chris and Nick Klapiec also own and operate Klapiec Express, a local and long-haul trucking company covering 48 states and Canada. They have a variety of trailers, including flatbed, step deck, dry vans, chip trailers and log trailers. In partnership with PGT Trucking Inc., a multi-service transportation firm and large flatbed trucking company out of Aliquippa and a leader in progressive freight transportation, Klapiec Express is part of a network of more than 950 power units and 30 facilities. This gives the company access to extensive freight and support programs, allowing it to provide a broader range of service and continue to grow.



## Lyric Theatre Rehabilitation Project enters 5th year of strategic development

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Colonel Drake Cultural Alliance, Inc. (CDCA) is entering its fifth year of a revamped strategy to rehabilitate the historic Lyric Theatre at 216 Seneca St. in Oil City. The project has moved from a model of completing small, piecemeal repairs to a comprehensive funding plan aimed at securing the full financial allotment required for an occupancy permit without incurring significant debt.

While the broader effort to save the building has spanned more than 20 years, momentum has accelerated recently. A consultant group was engaged to meld public and private funding, bringing the project to the brink of construction. In May 2025, the alliance engaged a Pittsburgh-based architectural firm to redesign the facility's interior and exterior. The new design maximizes the building's footprint to promote self-sufficiency once operational. Documents for these designs are expected in early 2026, allowing the project to move into active construction once successful bidders are scheduled.

Fundraising remains a critical component of the operational budget. The Karma Concert Series, now in its eighth year, produces live concerts on most Thursday nights from November through February. To date,

the series has raised more than \$50,000. These funds serve as a required cash match for various public grants secured to revitalize the facility.

The Lyric Theatre Rehabilitation Project is designed to preserve the last remaining example of the vaudeville houses that operated in Oil City during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The venue holds a unique place in cinematic history; in his biography, Mack Sennett claimed he first encountered Charlie Chaplin at the Lyric, where he offered Chaplin his first movie contract while the actor was performing with a comedy troupe.

Once reopened, the Lyric will serve as the permanent home for Community Playhouse, Inc. (CPI). Since 1955, CPI has produced several hundred theatrical shows, though the group has frequently changed venues — a history the group describes as "performing like gypsies." The non-profit producer plans to stage two to four major productions annually at the renovated site.

The facility is designed for versatile community use beyond traditional theater. The grand auditorium will feature a seating capacity of approximately 275, while a front gallery and exhibition space will accommodate lectures, art exhibits, concerts, second-run movies and charitable events. A newly designed second

level at the front of the building will hold about 75 people for donor events and smaller meetings.

Technical upgrades are a major focus of the 2026 construction phase. The building will be made fully accessible for people with disabilities and will feature improved energy efficiency. Safety installations include state-of-the-art security and fire suppression systems, along with an upgraded HVAC system utilizing advanced air filtering technology.

The nine-member volunteer Trustee group, which recently added a new treasurer and a new member, expects the facility to eventually employ two full-time and three part-time staff members. These roles will oversee stage productions, ticketing and facility management.

The CDCA was originally formed to operate the Drake Theatre between 1992 and 1995. The organization was later tapped by CPI, the current owner of the 216 Seneca St. property, to manage the renovation and eventual operation of the venue. The Alliance intends to maintain a wide range of public and private activities to ensure the facility remains financially viable into the future.

Additional information on the history of the Community Playhouse and a list of past performances can be found at [communityplayhouseoc.com](http://communityplayhouseoc.com).

## Core Goods reports sales growth, expands community food access



### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Core Goods sustained its focus on local agriculture and community access in 2025, a year characterized by a 21% sales increase and regional recognition. The market, which celebrated seven years in business in September, was named Business of the Year by the Venango Chamber in February.

The company's growth was supported by an expanded inventory from more than 110 local farms and small businesses. Most products are sourced from within 200 miles of Oil City, including vegetables, grains, eggs, milk, meat, honey and baked goods.

A central development in 2025 was the first full year of operation for the Core Goods Community Space. This attached storefront hosted 15 public classes and workshops on topics such as seed starting and honey production. The venue also hosted 17 private events, including business meetings and bridal showers.

In addition to on-site activity, the market provided 18 off-site catering services throughout the year.

Community service remains a primary driver for owner Ashley Sheffer, who launched the "Farm to Neighbor Fund" in 2025. While the program had been a long-term goal, its implementation was expedited following a reduction in SNAP funds in November. This "pay it forward" initiative allows residents experiencing food insecurity to shop for fresh food at no cost, funded by community donations.

The program saw immediate utilization, distributing nearly \$4,000 in fresh food within two months while raising more than \$6,000 in contributions. Core Goods has partnered with Community Services to manage the fund's long-term sustainability. Participants can shop on a weekly basis, and excess funds are used to purchase fresh food for the local food pantry.

Looking ahead to 2026, the business plans to expand the Farm to Neighbor Fund by deepening partnerships with local food pantries and community organizations. The market also intends to increase its selection of

prepared foods, including soups, salads and ready-to-bake meals.

Technological updates are also planned, with the team exploring online ordering options to improve internal operations and customer convenience. Education remains a priority, with plans for more classes focused on gardening and seasonal cooking, alongside increased "Producer Pop-Ups" that connect shoppers directly with farmers.

Core Goods originally opened in 2018 on the Northside of Oil City as a "zero waste" shop offering bulk items and produce. As community demand for local food grew, the business evolved and eventually moved to a larger Southside location in November 2022. Since the relocation, the market has expanded from simple bulk bins to include a full produce cooler, dairy section and freezer.

While the facility has grown, the core mission remains focused on supporting local producers, reducing waste and ensuring regional access to fresh food.

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# Chamber's Leadership Venango program nears graduation



## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Venango Area Chamber of Commerce is moving into the final stages of its 2025-2026 Leadership Venango program, with the current class scheduled to graduate in May. The nine-month leadership development initiative brings together professionals from a variety of industries to share perspectives and deepen their understanding of Venango County's infrastructure and economy.

While the Chamber's FLEX program is tailored specifically for young professionals,

Leadership Venango is designed for a mix of emerging and seasoned leaders. The 2025 program placed a strong emphasis on practical skills and real-world collaboration. Participants attended monthly sessions focused on leadership styles, communication, community health, economic development and the operations of nonprofit and government entities.

The current class began the year with a leadership retreat designed to establish peer connections and a foundation for collaboration. The

Leadership Venango Class of 2026 represents a broad cross-section of the regional workforce, including:

- Dan Ace (Matrik Group)
- Emily Antkowiak (Oil Region Library Association)
- Kyle Bintrim (Webco Industries)
- Elijah Daubenspeck (Family Service and Children's Aid Society)
- Kathy Dunham (McGill Power Bell & Associates)
- Jordan Hall (Raymond James Financial)
- Madalyn King (Morrison Funeral Home)

- Jennifer McClellan (Sce-  
nic Rivers YMCA)
- Shanna Peterson (UPMC  
Northwest)
- Corey Piel (Raymond  
James Financial)
- Hannah Plowman (Ve-  
nango Chamber)
- Michele Tucker (Bear's  
Furniture)
- Shayla VanHorn (North-  
west Commission)
- Michael Veloso (First  
National Bank)

Looking toward 2026, the Chamber plans to expand the long-term impact of the program by increasing opportunities for

alumni engagement. Key goals include hosting networking events and creating intentional connections between current participants and program graduates to encourage mentorship and continued civic leadership.

Chamber staff reviews the program content annually, incorporating feedback from the previous class to ensure the curriculum remains relevant to the shifting needs of the community. While some presenters have participated in the program since its inception, other sessions are updated yearly to reflect current

economic and social trends.

Leadership Venango was originally established to develop a pipeline of local leaders prepared for community involvement. Many graduates of the program eventually serve on regional boards, volunteer for local initiatives or move into executive roles within their organizations.

The Chamber continues to seek new applicants and employers who view the program as a strategic investment in both professional development and the future of Venango County.



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# Clifford's Carpets grows through community arts



## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Clifford's Carpets has long been a familiar name in Oil City, known as a trusted flooring destination backed by decades of hands-on experience. This locally owned business has built a strong reputation for quality products, friendly customer service and a wide selection of flooring options for both residential and commercial customers throughout the area, including CoreTec, Anderson Tuftex, Shaw, Engineered Floors, Milliken, Karndean and Godfrey Hirst.

Beyond its inventory, the store functions as a community space for regional workshops and arts education. The facility hosts classes for stained glass, watercolor and other artistic disciplines. These programs serve as a gateway for new visitors while supporting the business's involvement in community-centered events such as Small Business Saturday, Artist Sunday and the Winter Makers Market.

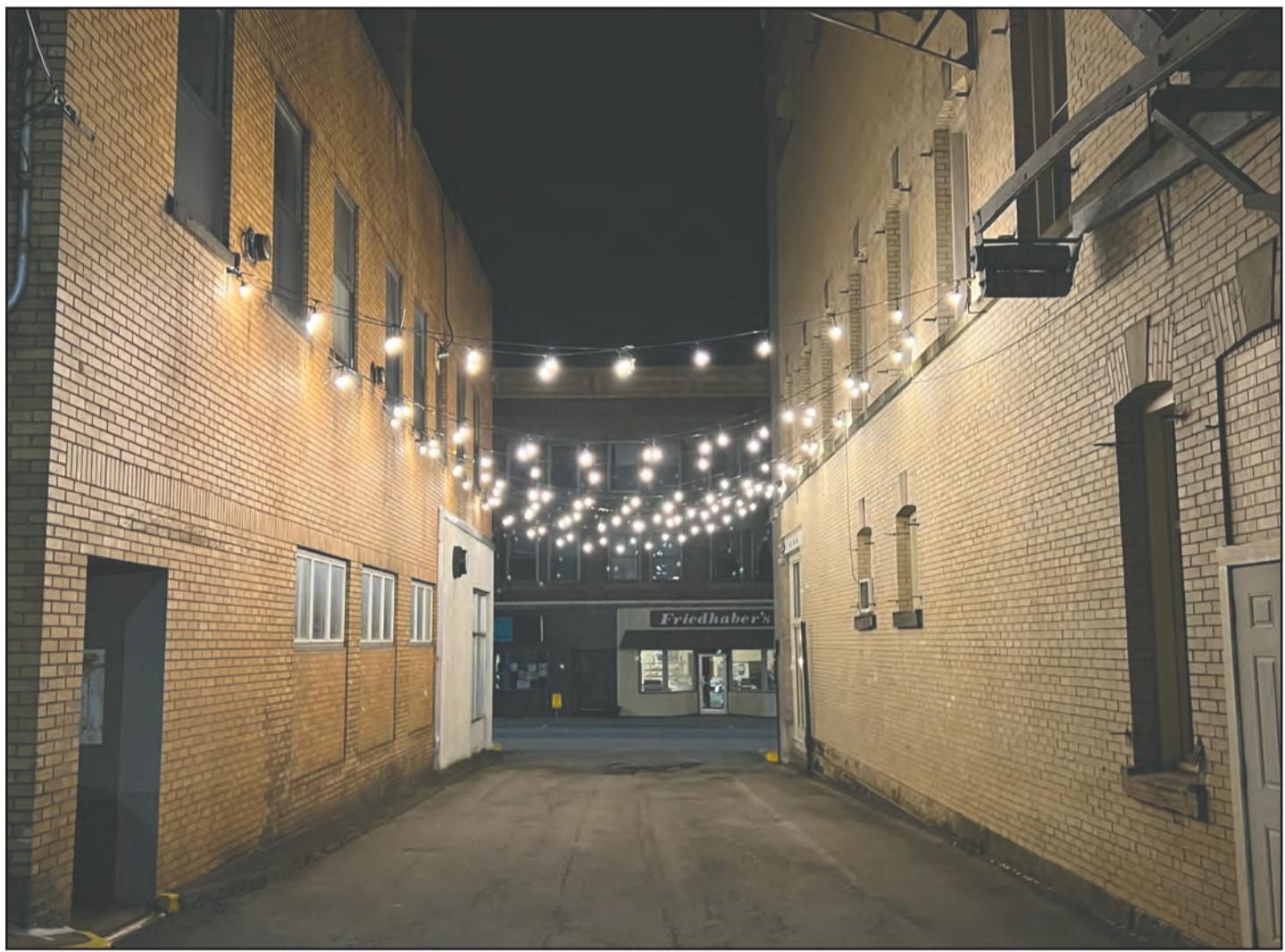
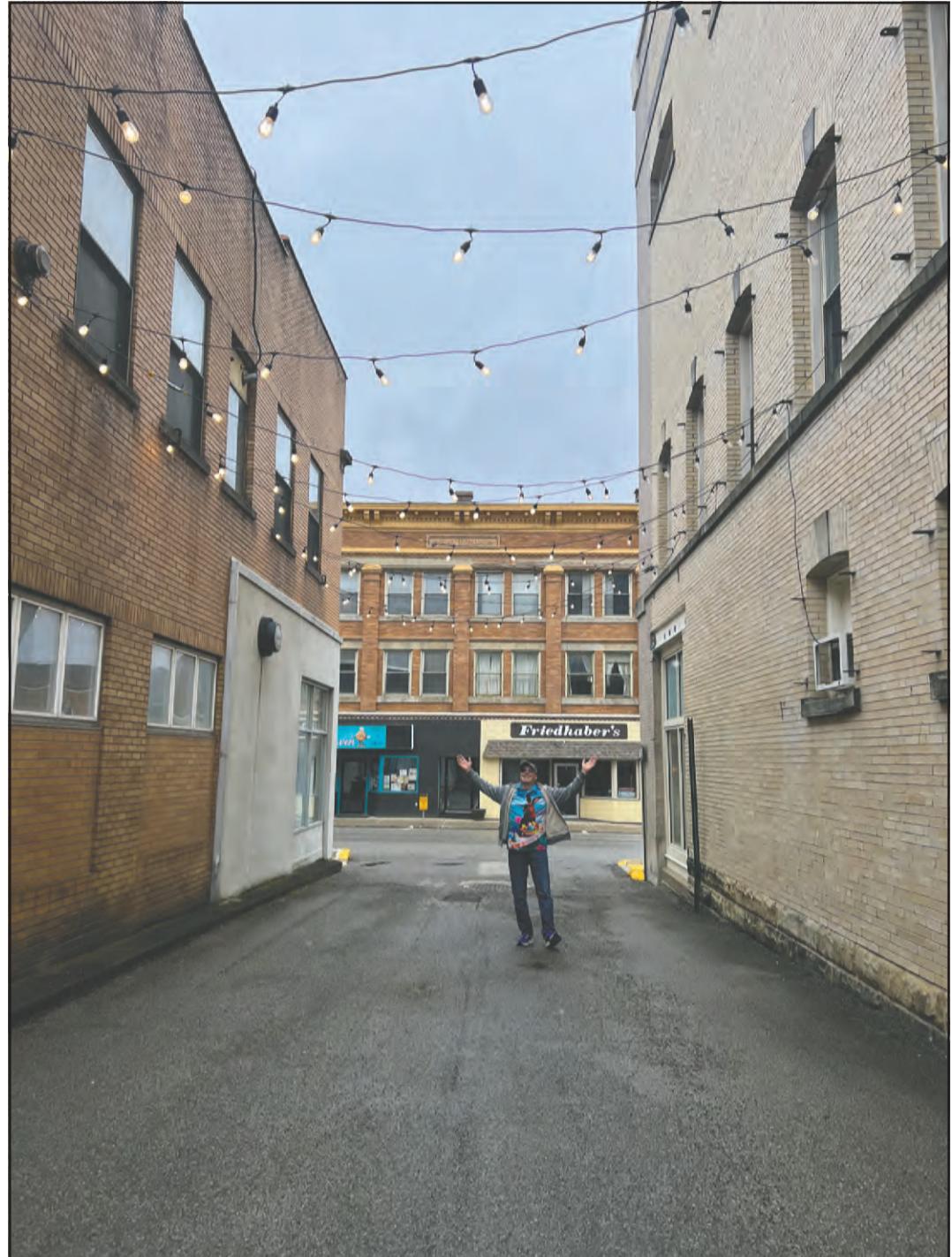
The business currently utilizes a gallery wall to feature the work of regional creators. For January and February 2026, the store is highlighting



local painter Stacey Sopher. An Oil City native and retired teacher from the Oil City Area School District, Sopher creates nature landscapes and is an active member of the Venango County plein air group.

Looking toward the summer months, the business is a participant in the "Under the Lights on Lindow" series. This nighttime market features live music, food trucks and local artisans. The events are scheduled for the third Thursday of each month from June through September, running from 6 to 9 p.m.

Management utilizes Facebook and Instagram to provide updates on these seasonal events and upcoming workshops. By combining its primary flooring services with a schedule of artist-led programming, Clifford's Carpets maintains its role as a regional hub for both home improvement and local creative events.



# Tiered Benefits brings retirement services to Oil City

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Tiered Benefits, LLC began serving clients in Oil City in January 2025. Established by Patrick Pelletier, the agency provides Medicare, health insurance and retirement planning services to residents

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Insurance Agent**

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throughout the region.

Operating from the historic National Transit Building at 206 Seneca St., the firm serves clients in Venango, Clarion, Crawford and Forest counties.

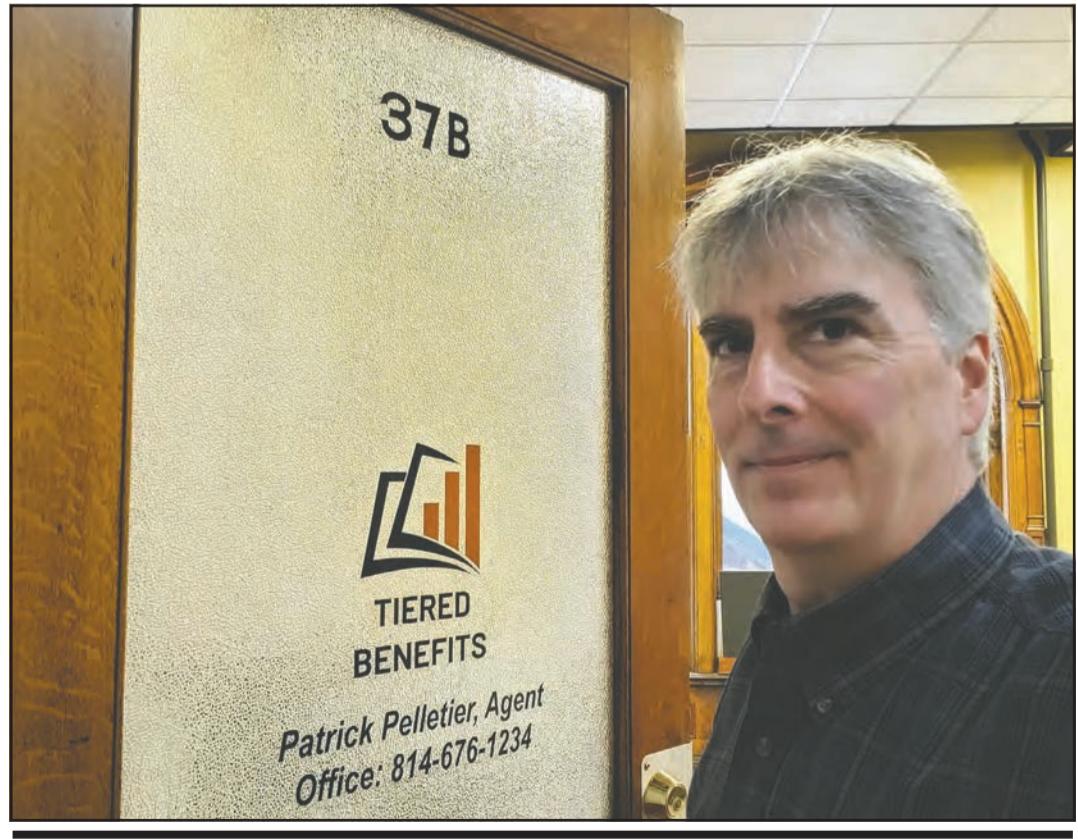
Pelletier aims to provide big-city health agency services

locally by contracting with several regional and national carriers, including UPMC, Highmark, Aetna and United Healthcare.

The agency emphasizes the importance of understanding how local healthcare providers interact with insurance carriers. As federal and state legislative changes continue to reshape the health industry, the firm focuses on keeping clients informed of how these shifts affect the cost of care and available treatment options.

A primary focus of the practice is helping individuals navigate retirement income decisions. These choices often involve complex ramifications regarding Social Security and Medicare. Pelletier provides a specialized Income Analysis service to help clients compare Social Security options as they approach retirement age.

The analysis addresses frequent concerns, such as the impact of retiring before age 60 or taking early Social Security at age 62. Other considerations include Medicare eligibility at 65, whether Social Security must be taken simultaneously to receive Medicare benefits and the consequences of working past age 70. The service is designed to identify potential lifelong financial penalties and find the most appropriate scenario for each individual.



**"2025 was a year of establishing Tiered Benefits, developing partnerships with insurance carriers and defining the business model."**

**Patrick Pelletier**  
founder of Tiered Benefits

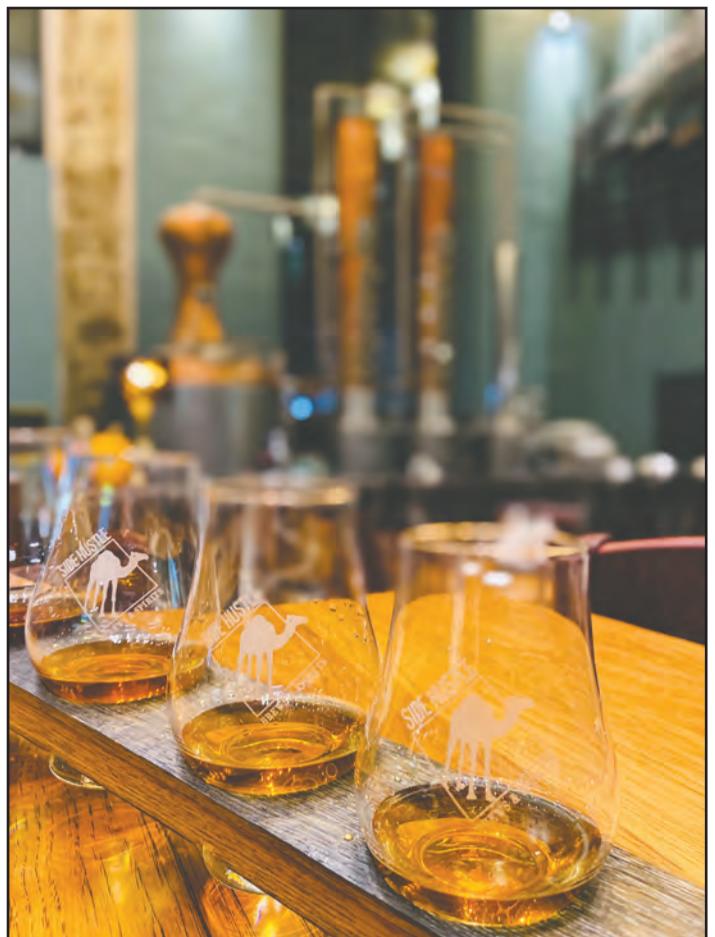
Pelletier brings more than 25 years of experience in the insurance and financial services industries. As a certified Social Security income analyst, he reviews past earnings to calculate comparative income scenarios and determine which solutions align with a

client's long-term goals.

"2025 was a year of establishing Tiered Benefits, developing partnerships with insurance carriers and defining the business model," Pelletier said. Looking toward 2026, the agency plans to expand its team, build an online and

social media presence and assist more residents with health and retirement planning.

Consultations are provided without obligation. Appointments can be scheduled by calling 814-676-1234 or emailing [Patrick@TieredBenefits.com](mailto:Patrick@TieredBenefits.com).



## Exchange Oil City refreshes menu, adds weekend brunch *'Oil City's modern melting pot'*

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Exchange Oil City, by Side Hustle Brews & Spirits, is entering 2026 with a focus on menu innovation and expanded service hours following its July 2025 opening.

The venue, known for el-

evated pub fare alongside in-house craft brews and spirits, has begun tweaking its menu based on local demand and introducing weekly specials. To accommodate weekend crowds, the establishment now offers extended hours and breakfast and brunch

menus every Saturday and Sunday.

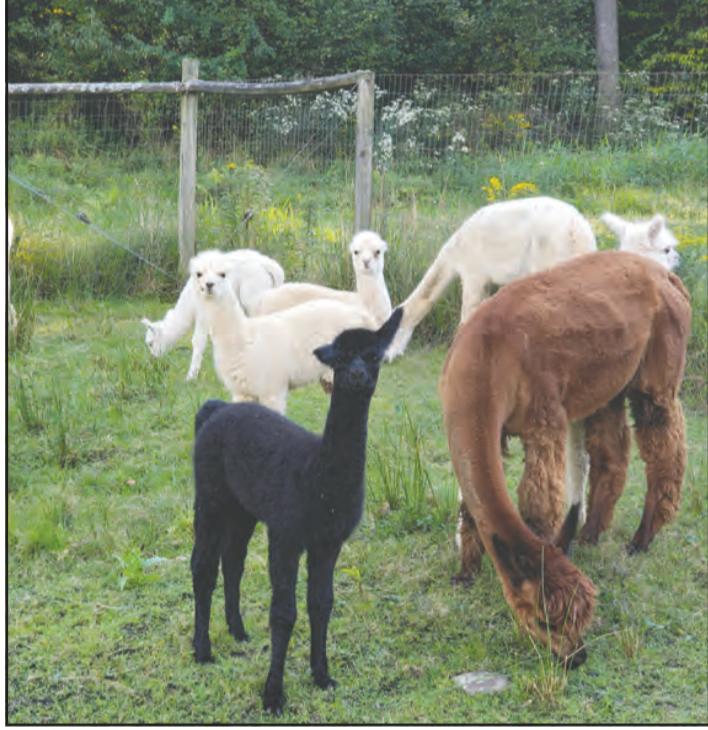
Located in downtown Oil City, the business was established with the goal of becoming a community hub for local businesses, residents and visitors. Management describes the vision for the venue as

"Oil City's modern melting pot."

As the business moves into its first full calendar year, it aims to solidify its position as a central gathering place for the community while continuing to refine its food and beverage offerings.



## Forest Glen Alpacas reports growth, sets 2026 event schedule



### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Forest Glen Alpacas is expanding its regional reach following a year of increased sales in New York and the birth of eight crias on its Titusville farm.

The business, established in 2003, saw sales improve significantly at New York craft fairs over the last three years, though the Yankee Peddler festival in Ohio remains its most lucrative event after a decade of attendance. Locally, the farm participated in Oil City-sponsored events including Small Business Saturday, Artesian Sunday and Makers

Market, operating out of Clifford's Carpets on the south side.

Owner Tina, who processes her alpacas' fiber by knitting and weaving, reported that eight crias — five females and three males — were born in 2025. Following a farm tradition started in 2004 with the letter "A," all 2025 newborns received names beginning with "V" to help track their ages.

The 2026 schedule includes a return to the Crawford County Fair and a trip to Latrobe for the Westmoreland Arts Festival over the July 4th holiday. The farm typically brings two alpacas to

these events for public interaction.

"This is a wonderful way for folks to learn about alpacas and of course it boosts sales at the gift shop," Tina said.

Items made on the farm are labeled with the name of the specific alpaca that provided the fiber. This practice has led some customers to visit the farm to photograph the animal associated with their purchase.

Future plans for 2026 include continued support for Oil City markets, another pop-up event at the Iron Works in Titusville and the Christmas in the Country events in Hamburg.

N.Y. A small display of products also remains available at the Titusville Market House.

The business has evolved from a single card table at its first craft fair in 2004 to a 16-by-32-foot tent today. After previously maintaining a herd of 75 animals, the farm now keeps approximately 35 alpacas, a size Tina said allows her to manage daily care alongside the craft fair circuit. Two years ago, she added a loom to her operation to produce shawls.

The farm and on-site gift shop are open to visitors. Guests are encouraged to call ahead or visit when the owner is on-site.

## Electralloy, G. O. Carlson Inc. invests in workforce and equipment

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

G. O. Carlson Inc. continued its specialty steel production in Oil City throughout 2025, melting materials used in global aerospace, defense and space industries. Through its family of companies, the firm processes recycled metal and raw materials in an electric arc furnace located along the Allegheny River.

The company's teams in the melt shop, chemical laboratory, remelt and finishing operations produce ingot, billet, round bar, forged block and plate. These materials are used in critical applications ranging from aircraft wings and nuclear submarines to space launch vehicles. While the final products reach demanding environments worldwide, company officials emphasized that the process begins with the workforce in Venango County.

Looking ahead to 2026, the company will focus on three primary priorities: safety, quality and ongoing investments in personnel and equipment. These investments are intended to allow the firm to compete globally while remaining based in Oil City. For residents driving past the mill along Route 8, the external brick buildings and stacks remain a landmark, but internal

Alloy Steel in Lower Burrell, along with locations in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, and Watervliet, New York.

The company noted that its primary asset is the "people behind the pour." The current workforce consists of a mix of long-tenured employees with decades of experience and new hires. Over the past year, the firm celebrated various retirements and internal promotions while welcoming new team members into production, maintenance, quality and administrative roles.

Electralloy remains committed to the next generation of manufacturers by supporting local technical schools, workforce programs and community initiatives. By providing plant visits and early-career opportunities, the company introduces students to careers in the trades and manufacturing, highlighting stable employment options available within the region.

Electralloy has operated in Oil City since 1968. Its current regional footprint includes the Main Street corporate headquarters, the Wrought Products facility in Cherrytree Township and GOC Property Holdings operations in Siverly and Rouseville. The company also operates Braeburn

through careful planning. In response, the firm invested in maintenance and facility upgrades to ensure competitive delivery and reliability for its global customer base.

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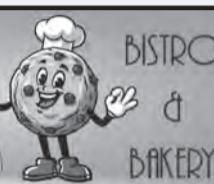
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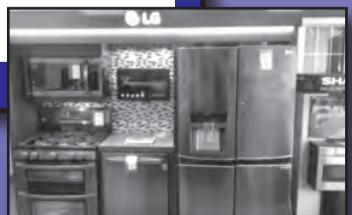
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## Oil City artist Lineman set for National teaching tour

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Linda Lineman of Lineman's Porcelain and Painted Memories will manage a significant teaching schedule in 2026, having been selected to instruct at two national conventions and two state retreats. Lineman, who operates a studio in the National Transit Building, has been a fixture in the regional arts community for nearly two decades.

Her 2026 tour begins April 23-26 at the Town & Country Decorative Painters Annual Retreat, held at the Crestfield Camp and Conference Center in Slippery Rock (townandcountrydecorativepainters.com). In June, she will travel to the National Annual Painting & Creative Expo at the Trussville Civic Center in Alabama, scheduled for June 23-27 (apceexpo.net).

Lineman will travel to these national conventions with Diane Kellogg, of Oil Creek Originals, a former local artist now based in South Carolina. In August, Lineman is scheduled for the OKC Painting Palooza in Oklahoma City, followed by the Golden Triangle Pittsburgh Club Retreat on Oct. 22-25 (goldentrangledecorativepainters.org).

2025 marked the 19th year Lineman has maintained her studio in the second-floor Annex of the historic National Transit Building at 206 Seneca St., #2M. She offers weekly porcelain and acrylic classes and project-specific sessions designed to accommodate student schedules. "I really enjoy sharing my love of the arts," Lineman said. "When I teach, I show them my style of painting and the joy that it brings."

Lineman holds several leadership roles, serving as president of the Town & Country Decorative Painters Club and the Pennsylvania Porcelain Artist Association, as well as



treasurer of the Western Pennsylvania Porcelain Artist Club. She is a member of the International Porcelain Artist & Teachers Association and the World of China Painters Association. Lineman noted that porcelain art, or china painting, is becoming a rare artform in the U.S.; of the five clubs in the Pennsylvania state group, only the Western



Pennsylvania club in Mercer remains active.

In November, Lineman will return as a vendor at the Annual Gingerbread Tour at Cook Forest, scheduled for Nov. 6-8 at the Sawmill Center. Under the branding "Bold Color or Delicate Beauty," she offers custom-designed items including baby birth announcements, wedding gifts, pet portraits and

holiday decor. Her work is available for purchase at her Oil City studio, Victorian City Art & Frame in Franklin and Transit Art Gallery & Gifts.

Additional information and portfolios can be found at lpmchina.com or on the Lineman's Porcelain and Painted Memories Facebook page.

## Edward Jones relocates to Reno, expands multi-advisor service model

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Financial Advisor Donna Rapp oversaw a significant expansion and relocation of her Edward Jones branch in 2025, moving the office from Oil City to 2141 Allegheny Blvd in Reno. The transition to a larger facility was driven by an increasing client base and the need for a multi-financial advisor office model.

The branch expansion included the addition of Kodie Earp-Hughes as a financial advisor in February. Earp-Hughes brought 17 years of experience within the Edward Jones organization, including extensive knowledge of office operations, client services and customized financial solutions.

Traci Kaufman, branch office administrator, provided leadership and stability during the staff transitions and the implementation of system upgrades. In July, the team welcomed Jodi Phillips as a branch



office administrator to assist with client relations at the new Reno location. Additionally, Deborah Thompson — formerly a senior branch office administrator — rejoined the branch as a financial advisor after completing her professional training. Thompson's new role is intended to deepen client relationships through personalized strategies and comprehensive advice.

For 2026, the branch aims to help investors achieve financial fulfillment through personalized planning. The team plans to host a community event later this year to celebrate the recent growth and introduce the new staff members to the region.

The office has integrated new state-of-the-art technology and planning tools to facilitate more detailed financial conversations. A primary feature of this update is the introduction of a "Financial Planning relationship," which provides clients with a roadmap for their financial fulfillment through

personalized planning. The team plans to host a community event later this year to celebrate the recent growth and introduce the new staff members to the region.

Donna Rapp has operated her practice in the region for over two decades, having started with Edward Jones in 2003. The move to a multi-advisor format represents a shift in the firm's traditional single-advisor branch model, offering clients access to a broader team of professionals under one roof.

The branch remains dedicated to listening and serving with integrity as it continues its growth in Reno and the surrounding Venango County area.

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## CASA appoints new director, schedules events

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

CASA of Venango County, Inc. underwent a leadership transition in 2025 as the organization prepares for an expanded recruitment drive in the coming year. Gina Graham, previously an advocate supervisor, assumed the role of executive director in June.

Graham previously served the agency from 2014 to 2016 under the direction of former executive director Cinnamon Evans. After exploring a different career path, Graham returned to the program in 2024 to continue her work with children in need. The agency also appointed Angela Geric as advocate supervisor in December. Geric brings previous professional experience working with children in the foster care system.

For 2026, the organization's primary objective is to increase community involvement. CASA is seeking volunteers to serve as Court Appointed Special Advocates, acting as a direct voice for children within the judicial system. The organization is also recruiting new members for its board of directors.

Fundraising and community engagement remain central to the 2026 calendar. The annual Oil Country Bluegrass Festival will be held at the Oil City Moose Club on Feb. 28 from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. This will be followed by a Super Hero Race on April 4. Additionally, the agency will host its annual Car Cruise, an event designed to gather community members around the common goal of supporting vulnerable children.

The organization's current operations are supported by a dedicated group of volunteers: Tricia Albert, Heather Antill, Salli Bettle, Dale Ishman, Julie Lutz, Kori Greene, Bridgid McIntyre, Theresa McQuaide, Susan Urabasik, Penny Buckholtz, Barb Satterlee, Sara Uddin, Barb Koehler and Chris Salvo.

Guidance is provided by the board of directors, which includes Sherry Kulinski, Sherry Griswold, Robert Evans, Annette Fee, Clay Campbell and Brenda Carll. Residents interested in volunteer advocacy or board service can contact CASA at 814-670-0550.



## Heath Oil marks 55 years of growth, expands services across NW Pa.

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

In 1970, Heath Oil opened one gasoline station in Victory Heights on Rt. 322, Cranberry Township. The company has been expanding ever since and has now served customers in Venango, Mercer, Clarion and Crawford counties for 55 years.

Beginning with retail gasoline sales, Heath Oil soon expanded and added wholesale customers for gasoline, on- and off-road diesel fuel, kerosene and heating oil. The company continues to expand into other services as well. In July 2016, the company acquired Klasen Oil in Cochranton. Propane was to be added to the product line and continues to grow with new customers.

Ocean Spray Laser Car Wash, located at 299 Duncomb St. in Oil City also opened in April of 2018. Ocean Spray not only features a state-of-the-art laser car wash, but it is also a Heath Oil retail gas station for their customer's convenience, offering discounts on gas with a purchase of a car wash. Ocean Spray experienced record customer growth in 2025.

In November of 2019, the company opened the All American Car Wash in Meadville. Heath Oil took on a major renovation in 2021, adding new gasoline dispensers, new tanks and new offerings to in-

## Bailey's Jewelers marks first year, plans 2026 expansion

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

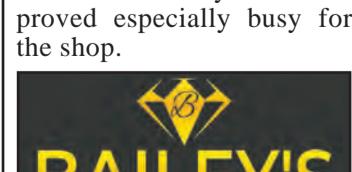
Bailey's Jewelers opened its doors in May 2025, establishing a full-service jewelry store featuring diamonds, gemstones, modern styles and estate jewelry. Owner Derek Bailey, a lifelong Venango County resident, brings years of experience and training from the Gemological Institute of America to the new venture.

The business offers jewelry repair, watch and key fob battery replacement and gold buying. Bailey also utilizes a vast network of suppliers to source unique and one-of-a-kind pieces for clients. In June, the Venango Chamber of Commerce held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially welcome the store to the business community.

Reflecting on the first year of operation, Bailey said the local response exceeded expectations.

"The amount of community support we have received is overwhelming," Bailey said. "From the very first day, we have had a steady stream of customers."

The holiday season proved especially busy for the shop.



"Christmas time was extra busy for the new store as many people rushed in for that perfect piece for their loved one," Bailey said. "I wish I could've seen everyone's face that opened a little black box from Bailey's on Christmas morning."

Bailey said he views every jewelry purchase as a significant milestone rather than a simple transaction.

"Jewelry isn't just a purchase, it's a memory that is being made that will be passed down for generations," he said. "It means the world when a person chooses us to help make that memory happen."

In 2026, Bailey's Jewelers plans to introduce multiple new product lines. Bailey also intends to design and sell orig-

inal pieces, expanding custom design options to ensure there is no limit on what the shop can create.

The store will celebrate its one-year anniversary in May with a planned event, sales and promotions. Bailey said the business looks forward to serving as a trusted jeweler for Venango and surrounding areas for years to come.

# Creekside Granite expands cabinetry and stone offerings

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Creekside Granite focused 2025 on strengthening internal systems and expanding fabrication capabilities to manage higher project volumes. The company, which serves Venango County and the surrounding region, introduced updated fabrication and scheduling workflows designed to reduce project bottlenecks and create predictable installation timelines for residential clients.

In response to shifting supply trends, the company increased its selection of domestic stone options throughout 2025. This expansion of American-quarried products was paired with the growth of a cabinetry program that added new design styles to support kitchens, bathrooms, laundry rooms and mudrooms.

Technological upgrades were a primary driver of the year's progress. The company implemented a digital cataloging system to assist customers in identifying color variations and slab characteristics. Additionally, updates to digital templating tools, shop layout software and communication



platforms were integrated to improve accuracy in fabrication and transparency during the quoting process.

Internally, the company prioritized staff development through cross-training in fabrication and field operations.

Staff gained experience in field measurement and design assistance, a move intended to maintain quality standards during

periods of increased demand.

As the business moves into 2026, the primary objective is to further refine

production workflows. The company plans to reduce turnaround times by improving communication between the showroom, fabrication team and installation crews.

The coming year will also see an expansion of custom storage solutions. Creekside Granite is preparing to introduce additional design options for mudrooms, laundry rooms and built-in storage. This move is part of a long-term plan to position the firm as a comprehensive residential design partner.

Material sourcing will continue to evolve in 2026. The company intends to further increase domestic stone availability while exploring new quartz selections that align with upcoming design trends. Strengthening relationships with suppliers remains a focus to ensure high-quality material availability for contractors and homeowners.

Ongoing investment in digital layout tools and customer communication platforms will continue through the year, alongside continued training in field templating and installation to support craftsmanship standards.

## Beast Boutique marks 24 years in Oil City

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Gary and Marissa McFarland established Beast Boutique in 2002 following the acquisition of their first Mastiff, Sherman "The Tank" Niles. The dog was a "true character," and he served as the namesake and inspiration for the state-certified grooming salon, which provides services for all breeds of dogs and cats at 103 Jefferson St.

The facility is designed as a small, open salon with natural lighting to ensure pet comfort. The boutique has provided treatments for regional pets for over two decades, including traditional domestic animals and exotic species such as hamsters, rabbits and ferrets. The salon also performs specialized services for birds, including beak dremeling and nail trimming.

Marissa McFarland brings 23 years of grooming experience to the business, utilizing a "one on one" environment to minimize animal stress. The salon features state-of-the-art equipment and specialized conditioners designed for various coat types. While the boutique serves all sizes, McFarland noted a professional preference for grooming Standard Poodles, Doodles and Newfoundlands, citing the technical work and finished results as a highlight of the practice.

The boutique specializes in a range of services from breed-standard grooming to custom pet trims tailored to an animal's unique personality. The owners operate under the personal mission to "Live like someone left the gate open," emphasizing a passion for the industry and the well-being of the animals in their care.

## Wash by Mark enters ninth year of business

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Wash by Mark, a locally owned exterior cleaning company operated by Mark Baughman, entered its ninth year of business in 2026 following a period of steady growth across northwestern and western Pennsylvania. The company is operated by a family team that includes Baughman's grandson, Ryder Mitchell, and son-in-law, Jake Faunce.

The business provides a wide range of residential and commercial exterior cleaning services, including house washing for single-family homes, rental properties, apartment complexes and commercial buildings. The company's service capabilities cover various exterior surfaces such as vinyl siding, brick, stone, stucco, painted and natural wood, metal siding, Hardie board, composite materials and decking.

In 2025, Wash by Mark served customers across a 10-county region including Venango, Clarion, Forest, Warren, Butler, Crawford, Erie, Mercer, Lawrence and Allegheny counties.

Commercial accounts increased during the year, with several contracts already secured for the 2026 season. The business continues to be driven by a base of repeat customers, including landlords, realtors,

housing managers, schools, churches and restaurants.

The company has also developed working relationships with local contractors to provide post-construction and post-restoration cleaning. Significant projects completed in 2025 included major apartment complexes that required the use of man lifts to access elevated surfaces. With its family-led team, the company reports it is equipped to manage projects of virtually any size.

A notable increase in demand during 2025 involved asphalt shingle roof cleaning. Using a specialized soft-wash process, the company removes black algae, moss, lichens, mold and organic debris without damaging the roofing materials. This specific treatment is designed to halt further organic growth, allowing natural weather conditions to gradually remove remaining residue over time.

Additional services provided by the firm include surface cleaning and degreasing for concrete sidewalks, driveways, porches, patios, entryway ramps and parking lots. The company also offers fleet washing for trucks, semi-trucks and construction equipment, as well as rust stain removal and interior and exterior gutter cleaning.



## 7 Foot Productions & Marketing continues growth alongside customers

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Many local businesses know they need video and social media, but aren't always sure where to start, what to prioritize or how to tell if it's working. Throughout the year, 7 Foot Productions partnered with its clients to develop a clear strategy and execute it, helping them use video, social media and advertising to support real goals rather than chase trends.

Video remains the foundation of the company's work, but 2025 reinforced a simple belief: content works best when it has a purpose.

By combining video, so-

"Our role isn't just to make videos, it's to help businesses and organizations grow and see real results from their marketing and advertising."

**Devin Zagar**  
CEO of 7 Foot Productions

cial media management and targeted advertising, the company helped clients reach the people they were trying to serve and take meaningful next steps. In one example, a client increased attendance by more than 34%, representing roughly 2,000 additional attendees, through a strategic video and advertising approach.

As the work grew, so did the team. In 2025, 7 Foot Productions added another employee and welcomed an intern, allowing the company to better support clients while continuing to invest in local talent. Building a capable, reliable team has been an important part of maintaining quality while expanding services.

Behind the scenes, the company also continued refining its systems and processes to create a smoother experience for clients. Clearer planning, better communication and a more organized workflow helped projects move efficiently and gave clients confidence throughout the process.

"Our role isn't just to make videos," CEO Devin Zagar said. "It's to help businesses and organizations grow and see real results from their marketing and advertising."

Looking ahead to 2026, 7 Foot Productions & Marketing plans to continue growing intentionally. The company is focused on partnering with businesses and organizations that see the value of video-based marketing and advertising and want a trusted partner to guide the process. To support that growth, plans are in place to add another team member with a focus on video production and editing.

With strong community relationships and a proven approach, 7 Foot Productions & Marketing enters 2026 focused on helping businesses and organizations across the region grow.

7 Foot Productions & Marketing is located at 19 Central Ave, 3rd Floor, Oil City, PA 16301. For more information, visit [www.7footproductions.com](http://www.7footproductions.com).

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# CATA marks 10 years in Venango County with new vanpool program, service upgrades 'pathway to opportunity and stability'

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Crawford Area Transportation Authority (CATA) is marking its 10th year of service in Venango County with the introduction of a vanpool program designed to expand commuting options and support sustainable travel. The initiative joins several new service updates, including a digital payment system and a regional lifeline route.

CATA Executive Director Tim Geibel described the new vanpool program as a vital resource for the regional workforce. "Vanpooling is a game-changer for rural communities," Geibel said. "It provides reliable, affordable transportation for employees who don't have access to a personal vehicle, helping them get to work consistently and on time. By sharing the ride, workers save money, reduce stress and build connections with their coworkers — all while employers benefit from improved attendance and a broader, more dependable workforce." Geibel noted that the program is more than just a ride, calling it a "pathway to opportunity and stability."

In addition to the vanpool initiative, CATA continues

"It provides reliable, affordable transportation for employees who don't have access to a personal vehicle, helping them get to work consistently and on time. By sharing the ride, workers save money, reduce stress and build connections with their coworkers — all while employers benefit from improved attendance and a broader, more dependable workforce."

**Tim Geibel**  
CATA Executive Director



to operate a lifeline route connecting Venango and Crawford counties. The Titusville-Oil City route runs every Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. To simplify fare collection, the authority recently introduced CataPAY, a digital system for fixed-route trips. Riders can use a reloadable smartcard or a mobile app to swipe a validator upon boarding. Smartcards are available at the CATA Elm Street office or through a partnership with the Human Services Building on Dale Avenue in Franklin.

The authority's 10th year also included several community-focused expansions. CATA added a stop at Career Link to the Franklin fixed route and provided specialized transportation for the Halloween Trunk-or-Treat at Two Mile Run. The agency participated in the annual Oil City Clean Up Day and multiple Touch-a-Truck events.

Most recently, CATA coordinated food voucher transport in December and volunteered for a food box pickup in Jan. 2026 in coalition with the City of Franklin. Employers or commuters interested in the vanpool program can find information at [www.catabus.org/vanpool-program](http://www.catabus.org/vanpool-program).

## Cottage Hill Fudge Shop enters 16th year with expanded local presence

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Cottage Hill Fudge Shop is entering its 16th year of operation, seeing a steady increase in business across its three regional sales locations.

Owned by Jeanette Demmer Biltz, the business originally opened in 2000 and resumed operations in 2019 following a 10-year hiatus. Today, the shop's fudge is available at Hepler's Meats on U.S. Route 322 in Cranberry, Quilters Cupboard in Seneca and Core Goods on the Southside of Oil City. The owner reported that a fourth location is expected to open soon.

During the summer and fall,

the shop is a staple at downtown festivals, including First Fridays and Heritage Week. The business typically sets up a tent on Seneca Street near the McNerney/Cork & Screw area or at Karma off Elm Street.

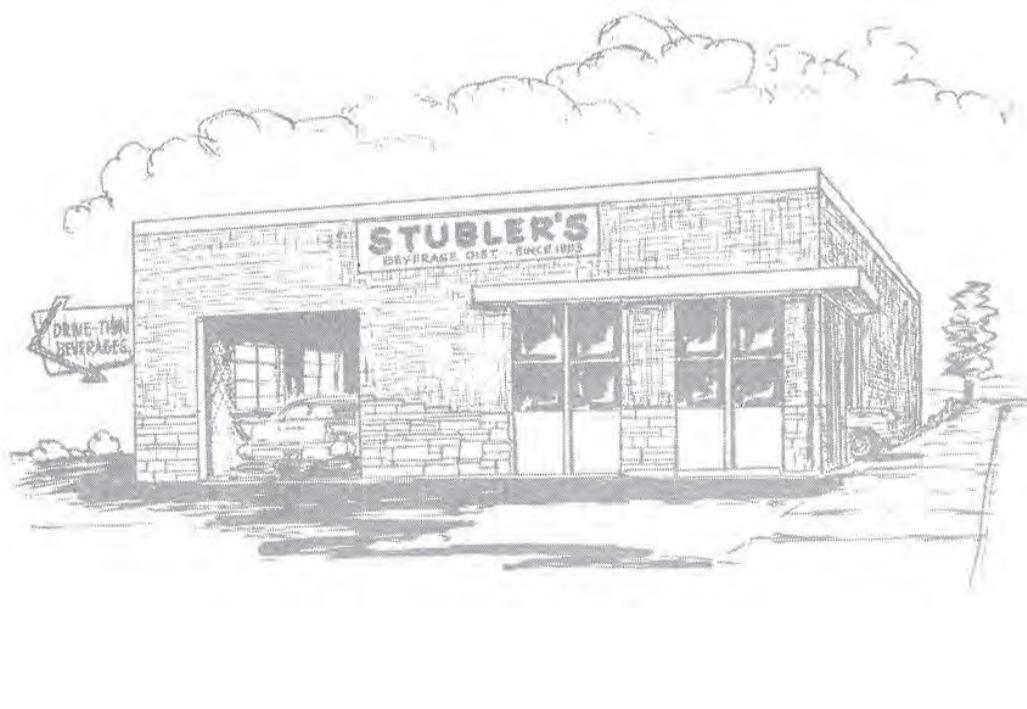
The fudge is made fresh with cream and butter in 18 flavors: Chocolate, chocolate walnut, chocolate coconut, turtle, peanut butter, peanut butter chocolate, tiger butter, amaretto chocolate, praline, maple, maple nut, vanilla, cherry, cherry nut, pistachio, penuche, dark chocolate caramel sea salt and chocolate raspberry.

Product is sold in individually wrapped quarter-pound pieces. Gift boxes are available in multiple sizes for birthdays, hostess gifts, door prizes or thank-you gifts.

Located at 169 E. Bissell Ave., the shop is generally open Tuesday through Friday when the "open" signs are displayed.

Customers should enter the foyer and ring the bell for assistance. For those unable to visit the shop, including shut-ins, free delivery is offered within city limits or nearby for purchases of at least 2 pounds. Fudge can also be mailed anywhere in the U.S. at standard postal rates.

Prospective customers may call 814-676-2655 to arrange purchases outside of standard hours.



## Stubler Drive Thru Beverage adapts to shifting market

### SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Stubler Drive Thru Beverage Inc. continued to adjust its operations in 2025 as the retail beverage market faced increased competition from grocery stores and gas stations. Despite these shifts in customer habits, the locally owned distributor remains focused on its core model of convenience and personal service, serving thousands of monthly customers from its location at 802 E. Second St.

A central part of the

company's recent strategy is the delivery program introduced in 2024. Throughout 2025, customers utilized the ability to browse real-time inventory online and receive orders directly at their doors. The business reports steady growth in this service, with repeat usage reflecting a regional demand for reliable, home-based delivery options.

Looking toward 2026, Stubler Drive Thru Beverage is prioritizing the community support that has sustained the business for nearly 150 years.

While purchasing options in the region have expanded, the company continues to position itself as a locally owned alternative defined by familiarity and a long-standing presence in Venango County.

Management remains committed to serving the region with the same values that have historically defined the operation. Customers can visit the East Second Street location in person or place orders through the company's digital platform at [StublersDriveThru.com](http://StublersDriveThru.com).



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# Oil Region Ballet returns to the stage with 'Swan Princess'

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

The Oil Region Ballet (ORB) is continuing its dual-performance season precedent for 2026, preparing to return to the stage with its production of Swan Princess. The upcoming performances are scheduled for Feb. 27 and 28 at The Academy Theatre in Meadville, followed by a run on March 6 and 7 at the Barrow Civic Theatre in Franklin.

The family-friendly story follows a young Princess Odette who is transformed into a swan and held captive by an evil magician. In this rendition, the Prince is tricked into proposing to Odette's best friend, who has been transformed into an evil doppelganger. The company describes the princess as a "resourceful problem-solver" who gathers her friends to solve the conflict at its root.

The production features the famous music of Tchaikovsky and includes a cast of whimsical characters, including a dancing turtle, a snail and a crayfish that assist in Odette's rescue. The role of the Swan Princess is danced by Marley Plowman, the Prince by Christopher Warner and the villainous Von Rothburg by Brian Murphy. The production is supported by costumes designed by Tina Borger and lighting by Brendon Huff.

The upcoming season follows a successful 2025 run that tested the organization's flexibility. Despite being a paying customer that searches for theater space years in advance, ORB found that local theaters could not accommodate its 2025 performance dates. The company turned to Allegheny College, which offered space at the Gladys Mullenix Theatre while the student body was away on holiday break. This move required the ballet company to manage its own ticket sales independently — a task typically handled by a host theater. ORB managed the transition by selling tickets directly through its website and advertising via newspaper ads, television interviews and social media. Despite adverse weather, the season was hailed as a success.

The company has seen significant growth in its membership, now totaling 28 dancers between the ages of 11 and 49. The roster includes three petite apprentices, five new apprentices, 12 corps de ballet members and five adult corps de ballet dancers. An additional three adult guest dancers round out the performance group.

Organizational leadership has also



evolved, with Sylvia Cagle named as Ballet Mistress. Cagle will continue to dance with the company while managing student instruction and administrative duties. Choreography for the current season includes work by Cagle, Deborah Femovich and Brian Murphy, alongside former ORB dancers with degrees in dance: Carleigh Murphy, Victoria Stachelrodt and Grace Morrell. Deborah Femovich continues to serve as the company's Artistic Director.

Looking toward the remainder of 2026, the ORB board is addressing economic challenges that have

impacted regional support. The board has noted a decline in sponsorship giving and is focusing on new fundraising avenues. Additionally, local arts funding through grants is currently shifting, and it remains uncertain if the National Endowment for the Arts will continue its support as it undergoes an organizational overhaul.

ORB remains unique among regional arts groups because it does not own a permanent studio space or operate a for-profit dance school. Instead, it auditions dancers from all area dance schools to further their education. The

organization does not charge for auditions, participation fees or costuming, relying instead on the volunteer efforts of dance families. ORB also provides scholarships to dancers demonstrating financial need or exceptional talent and hosts Master Classes and Summer Intensives to bring professional instruction to the region.

The company's Outreach Programs continue to offer school-age children the opportunity to view a full act of a ballet at drastically reduced rates, followed by one-on-one question-and-answer sessions with the cast. For the 2026 winter performances, Girl

Scouting programs are in place to offer theater exposure, dance terminology instruction, backstage tours and participation in company warm-ups on stage.

Founded in 2009 by a small group of dance supporters, ORB is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the region through ballet awareness. Auditions for the 2026-27 season will be held this spring and listed in the winter performance programs. Volunteers interested in set or costume design are encouraged to contact the organization at [oilregionballet@gmail.com](mailto:oilregionballet@gmail.com).

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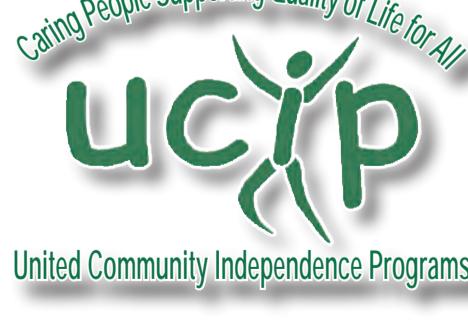
Applicants should be motivated and reliable with a solid work history; must pass a pre-employment drug screening and medical examination; have favorable ACT 34 clearance; and a valid driver's license with a receipt of a 5 year satisfactory driving record.

These positions may require evening and weekend availability depending on the shift. You will be providing support to individuals with developmental disabilities in a group home and community setting.

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