

North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce:

Actively Proactive The last year-plus has been a whirlwind of helping area companies remain viable throughout a changing economic client. | by Mark Berger

Many Chambers of Commerce statewide have been front and center when it came to aiding area businesses in getting the help they need to not only survive but also thrive. Whether it meant applying for grants from state and federal programs, donating and distributing supplies or being a sounding board, they have been adept at fostering change and providing guidance on numerous topics.

That trend continues and has been elevated with the **North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce**, located at 8045 Post Road. They have been fierce advocates for business owners in town and surrounding areas during the adjustment. With more than 400 members and growing in the Greater North Kingstown area (including Quonset Industrial Park), the Chamber remains steadfast in championing small and large business owners in need of assistance.



North Kingstown Chamber Executive Director Kristin Urbach has led the charge since taking over six-and-a-half years ago. Unlike many other top chiefs in her position in Rhode Island, she did not come up through the Chamber's ranks. Instead, she used her experiences in Washington, D.C., and beyond to accept this role

on expanding the regional economy. It's a challenge Urbach readily accepted.

"I served as the Director of Product Marketing at Tunstall Americas in Long Island City, NY, and in Pawtucket, RI, the Director of Service Excellence at George Washington Hospital and the President of the Junior League of Washington (in Washington, D.C.), so collaboration and community relations and the diversity of small businesses is a big part of my work," Urbach

said. "I grew up in East Greenwich and graduated from the Rocky Hill School, where I currently serve on the alumni board. When I learned of opportunity at the Chamber, I took this job to help the businesses and the community succeed and grow."

Their challenge became addressing the needs of those businesses struggling to survive. Urbach said during the pandemic, they secured from the state and distributed nearly 14,000 masks, 200 gallons of disinfectant solution and 4,020 bottles of hand sanitizers to 225 businesses and 2,012 employees. Urbach served on weekly state leadership calls to stay abreast of the changing state and federal guidelines for the Chamber to provide guidance to businesses. Most importantly, they were at the forefront of applying for and receiving state grant applications to continue to aid businesses that were affected by the pandemic.

As a result, the Chamber designed and executed the "Restore RI", "Small Business Relief Grant", "Take It Outside", and "Business Technical Assistant" grants. Additionally, there were federally-funded programs created by Congress to help shorten the funding gap. Urbach said being proactive in learning about funding opportunities both state and federal, applying and receiving the funds and helping businesses apply for them helped get many businesses survive.

"Through our 'Take it Outside' grant of \$138,000, we helped dozens of businesses by providing them with items that they needed to operate outside such as: heaters, tables, chairs, tents, and more. In doing so, these businesses didn't incur the capital expenses that they didn't budget for to continue to operate during the pandemic," said Urbach. "We assisted two businesses in applying for a business adaptation grant as they pivoted their operations by developing a new revenue stream. Both of those businesses received \$50,000 each."



The Chamber hired and trained three small business relief advisors to go door to door meeting with businesses to increase their awareness of the \$5,000 grant opportunity and to apply if they qualified. They covered the territories of North Kingstown, Jamestown, South Kingstown, Exeter, Middletown, West Greenwich, Portsmouth, Block Island and Charlestown.

They remain proactive in generating opportunities for their members. In the past, the Chamber was focused on providing networking, training, marketing, and referral opportunities. Since the pandemic, the Chamber has also pivoted to provide additional support to businesses by aiding them in accessing capital through grants and by continuing to refer business to them, she said.

Many of their recent events have been held via Zoom, she said. They also recently held a few events outdoors. Their most recent event, Savor the Sunset, at Casey Farm attracted 300 people. Other upcoming events include the Festival of Lights Tree Lighting Ceremony in Wickford Village in December, subject to potential regulations. In addition, they are hosting their second annual Making Spirits Bright/Trees of Lights event in December, where local nonprofits decorate a tree in the theme of their mission, and they sell raffle tickets. Urbach said that event is extra important because the raffle baskets funds that are collected throughout the month are donated to local nonprofits who participate in the event, such as the NK Food Pantry.

Urbach said there are plenty of reasons why companies should consider becoming members.

"We are committed to serving the community and the businesses in the area and providing them with the tools to become successful. The Chamber continues being proactive in determining what we can do to make the member's experience a positive one. There are many benefits to becoming a member, including a strong relationship with the community. We continue to grow and welcome anyone to meet with us to see how we can work together in growing your business."

The North Kingstown Chamber of Commerce opened its doors in 1929. They are committed to supporting new and existing businesses in the area. They serve some 400 members in town and surrounding areas that employ more than 11,000 people. There are two full-time and one part-time employees along with a 15-member Board of Directors that aid Urbach in making things happen.

For more information about the Chamber, including applying to membership, please call 401-295-2566 or email at info@northkingstown.com.



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