

# Northwest Commission is resource for community

## SUBMITTED ARTICLE

Located in Oil City, the Northwest Commission is dedicated to being a resource for business, economic and community development. Comprised of a team of 19 employees, the staff oversees multiple programs designed to assist small and medium-sized businesses, nonprofits and communities.

The Northwest Commission had an exciting 2023, according to a news release. Executive Director Jill Foys started off the year with her new role on the then-Governor-Elect's Transition Advisory Committee for Business Development, helping to provide insight into the needs of northwest Pennsylvania.

The Northwest Commission received national recognition from the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) for the Environmental Impacts of Long Range Transportation Planning in Northwest Pennsylvania project; partnered with the PA Broadband Development Authority to host events in both Venango and Clarion counties to help bring broadband to the un- and under-served; and Government Contracting Specialist Aaron Ritsig received a national certification for his extensive knowledge and experience in government contracting.

Several events and free education opportunities were hosted throughout the region, and staff had a record-breaking year, helping the eight counties served, including Venango, Clarion, Forest, Crawford, Erie, Lawrence, Mercer and Warren.

The programs at the Northwest Commission include Business Finance, International Marketing, Government Contracting, Transportation Planning, Grant Writing Technical Assistance, Greenways Block Grant, Business Development Programs and Municipal Services. These free programs are designed to strengthen and grow the region and are available to those within its boundaries.

### Business finance

The mission of the Northwest Commission's Business Financing Program is to stimulate the creation and expansion of small, for-profit businesses for the purposes of regional job growth. This initiative supports business-

es by offering fixed, low-interest loans that co-relate the amount financed to the number of jobs created and/or retained. In 2023, the loan program closed 16 loans totaling \$2,520,299 for 13 northwest Pennsylvania businesses.

One notable success story from 2023 was a collaborative project with The Allegheny Grille in Foxburg for construction, updated landscaping, furniture, fixtures and equipment to build and outfit a new, more permanent outdoor venue. The building has plumbing, gas and electricity, allowing it to be a more versatile hub for year-round events.

### International marketing

With international trade representatives that represent 44 countries worldwide, the experienced International Marketing team provides technical assistance, identifies and qualifies buyers, provides support at international trade shows and missions, compiles background checks and more.

One local business, Specialty Fitness Systems LLC based in Franklin has been an active client of the Northwest Commission's International Marketing program since 2014. Beginning with a request for assistance in support of SFS's first international shipment to South Korea, the Northwest Commission provided information on export documentation requirements, duties and taxes.

Since then, the international team has enjoyed witnessing SFS's international sales growth and success along with the company's increasing fluency in export subject matters. The program to date assisted the Venango County company in markets such as India, Pakistan, Australia, Germany, Japan, Qatar, Kuwait, Canada, Belgium, China, Czech Republic and the Netherlands.

In 2023, the Northwest Commission was able to provide three foreign company background checks (China, Iraq and Nigeria) and therefore helped the client decipher whether they were dealing with a viable prospective customer overseas. Furthermore, the program was able to assist with export technical assistance, specifically regarding export compliance and targeted sanctions.

Company representatives attended three export training sessions in the last year titled "Successfully Navigating International Business Deals,"



"Foreign Trade Zones/Duty Drawback" and "Basics of International Taxation". In addition, this program assisted nine other Venango County businesses with international marketing assistance.

### Government contracting

Last year was full of change and growth for the program, including the name. Formerly called PTAC, the Government Contracting program is now called APEX Accelerator. With nearly 100 locations nationwide, APEX Accelerator is a Department of Defense, Office of Small Business Program, and offers free assistance to small or large businesses interested in pursuing government contracts.

The experienced APEX team provides confidential services including counseling, instructions, market research, bid leads and more to help businesses succeed. The Government Contracting program hosts many events and educational opportunities throughout the year, as well as recently developing the Northwest PA Defense Council to better serve the needs of their clients.

Venango, Clarion, Forest and Lawrence counties are uniquely eligible for HUBZone certification. The APEX team has been and will continue to either recertify or newly certify companies that reside in and employ workers from historically underutilized areas to gain preferential access to federal contracting opportunities.

Through all these activities, the APEX program increases qualified sources and competition, and creates better value for government agencies and American taxpayers, while stimulating local economic activity as local businesses learn how to successfully navigate federal, state and local government contracting processes.

### Transportation planning

The Northwest Commission also serves as the Rural Planning Organization (RPO) to PennDOT. In this partnership, the RPO works with PennDOT to plan and prioritize projects in

Clarion, Crawford, Forest, Venango and Warren counties.

Over the course of 2023, the RPO completed work on the 2025-2050 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP). The plan is scheduled for adoption in March 2024. The plan serves as the gateway for projects to be funded on the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

In 2023, the RPO completed a Regional Micro Mobility Feasibility Study for all five counties. The report outlines the desirability and feasibility of micro mobility services in the NWRPO region. As part of this effort, the incorporation of industry standards, best practices and lessons learned for defining micro transit and other micro mobility services help to convey the general benefits and challenges of this process. The report culminates with several options for services that could enhance mobility and transportation access for riders who walk and bike around northwestern Pennsylvania.

The RPO is currently working on a Comprehensive Safety Action Plan for the City of Franklin that will wrap up this spring. The plan will identify locations that have high concentrations of fatal or serious injury crashes and propose the improvements needed to make them safer. Lastly, the RPO worked to prepare the next four-year TIP that is slated for adoption in June 2024 and will take effect in October 2024.

### Grant writing

In 2023, this program experienced tremendous outcomes for the region by providing technical assistance for Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant opportunities. In Venango, Clarion and Forest counties alone, they were able to assist with applications that brought \$1,144,097, \$35,000 and \$1,475,877 respectively in ARC Area Development grants and an additional \$2,957,000 from ARC POW-

ER grants to Venango County.

In Venango County, awarded projects include the County of Venango for broadband connectivity in Cranberry Township and the Venango County Economic Development Authority for the Business Innovation Center, as well as the Venango County Restaurant and Retail Food Accelerator. Additionally, Keystone Community Education Council received funds for their Transforming Our Workforce Ecosystem (TOWE) project.

In Clarion County, the Clarion County Economic Development Corporation received funding for the Clarion County Connected Destination Improvement Initiative, Destination Marketing Plan. Forest County received funding for broadband development and the Marienville Feasibility Study, as well Phase II of Four Seasons Trail Hub & Visitor Center submitted by Jenks Township.

The grant writing team assists public and nonprofit organizations in navigating various application stages on their path to obtain funding for community and economic development projects.

### Greenways block grant

The Northwest Pennsylvania Greenways Block Grant (GBG) program is a mini-grant program created to help fund projects identified in the Northwest Pennsylvania Greenways Plan that advance recreation, conservation and heritage initiatives. The Northwest Commission collaborates with the PA Department of Environment Protection (DEP), the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), and the PA Game Commission to leverage state funding, reducing the local match requirement to accomplish statewide goals and priorities on a regional level utilizing local capacity.

Since the program's inception in 2009, six projects have received \$60,866 in Forest County; ten projects have been awarded \$266,019 in Clarion County; and thirty-one projects have been awarded \$608,773 throughout Venango County.

### Business outreach

The Northwest Pennsylvania Partnerships for Regional Economic Performance (PREP) is one of ten economic development regions designated by the Commonwealth to

encourage regional coordination and efficient customer service to the business community. The Northwest Commission serves as the lead agency for the NW PREP program, which consists of a consortium of economic, workforce and educational service providers that work together to seek out untapped resources, partners and opportunities to improve upon the region's recovery, economic diversification, sustainability and growth strategies.

The Northwest Commission serves the eight-county Northwest Region through administering the Engage! program and partners with the Venango County Economic Development Authority, the Franklin Industrial & Commercial Development Authority, Clarion County Economic Development Corporation, Forest County Community and Economic Development and PennWest Clarion Small Business Development Center to assist businesses throughout Venango, Clarion and Forest counties.

### Municipal services

The Northwest Commission provides access to tools, resources and connections needed to make effective and efficient decisions to all 265 local governments in northwest Pennsylvania. Using federal, state and local partners, the goal is to unlock new opportunities for municipalities and provide training and technical assistance for stretching projects and budgets.

The Northwest Commission proudly coordinates the Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP). LTAP is a PennDOT sponsored program, bringing various free training workshops to municipalities and scheduling one-on-one technical assistance throughout the northwest PA region. In 2023, the LTAP program provided training to 328 municipal employees and nine tech assists were completed.

The Northwest Economic Development GIS mapping tool is available for municipal use. A public version of the map is available on at [www.northwestpa.org](http://www.northwestpa.org).

A regional Broadband Action Team has been developed to facilitate the partnership between the Commonwealth and local needs. Identifying unserved and underserved locations and funding opportunities is the team mission.