

PRESS ENTERPRISE

FARVER, MENSCH AND METTLER OBITUARIES PAGE 4

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\$2

70 saddle up for junior rodeo

Benton organizer: Masks, distancing optional

By **JULYE WEMPLE**
 Press Enterprise Writer

BENTON — The year's first Keystone Junior Rodeo event took place this weekend at the Benton Rodeo grounds, with 70 riders competing in nearly a dozen contests.

Saturday marked the first event at the grounds and comes on the heels of the statewide shutdown amid the coronavirus pandemic.

It also comes just weeks after the Benton Area Rodeo Association announced it had canceled its annual rodeo in July.

Junior Rodeo President John Hollenbach said two events in May had to

be canceled because of the pandemic, and this weekend's event had originally been scheduled for the first weekend in June.

He'd been in contact with the organizers for the Benton Rodeo, which rents out the grounds. Once Columbia County moved into the least restrictive green phase of coronavirus mitigation measures, he sent out an email to members.

"We actually did a poll, asking if they would come to an event," Hollenbach said. "An overwhelming number were in favor of it."

Saturday's early afternoon rain shower made a muddy mess of the rodeo grounds, but Hollenbach said it's

something riders are accustomed to dealing with.

"We rodeo in rain, sleet, snow, or sunshine," Hollenbach said.

'Up to the parents'

Although he didn't have an exact count of riders and family members on the grounds, it likely didn't exceed the 250 maximum number allowed for a gathering, he said.

But none of those in attendance was wearing a mask, something Hollenbach and his wife, Stefanie, say was suggested, but not mandatory.

"We haven't really stressed social distancing," Hollenbach admitted. **Please see RODEO page 5**



Press Enterprise/Julye Wemple

SUSANNA MANNIS, Cortland, New York, competes in barrel racing at the Keystone Junior Rodeo Association in Benton on Saturday.

Carnivals get second chance



Press Enterprise/Jimmy May

THE BLOOMSBURG FAIR is offering up this area of the fairgrounds for area fire companies to set up stands for a two-day carnival in July.

Bloom Fairgrounds to host area fire companies cheated by virus

By **JULYE WEMPLE**
 Press Enterprise Writer

BLOOMSBURG — Fire companies in Columbia and Montour counties will get a second chance at carnival season.

Bloomsburg Fair will open its fairgrounds next month for a Fireman's Relief Carnival to let area fire companies whose annual fund-raising festivals were canceled by coronavirus set up in a place where social distancing is possible. Fire departments from both counties will

set up stands July 17-18 near the fairground's Free Stage, between Gates 3 and 5, for a free-admission, free-parking weekend event.

So far, nearly a dozen fire companies have signed up, including Bloomsburg, Millville, **Please see CHANCE page 8**

Business boosters remain on track

DRIVE marks fifth year, adding rail access to its site

By **GERI GIBBONS**
 Press Enterprise Writer

DANVILLE — Jennifer Wakeman sometimes hears the whistle of a train going by her office at the Driving Real Innovation for a Vibrant Economy headquarters on Railroad Street and steps outside for a minute.



WAKEMAN

Wakeman, executive director of DRIVE, an organization aimed at economic development in Columbia and Montour counties, said she counts the train cars as they go by, remembering her childhood and her family's love for the railroad.

So when Wakeman provides a tour of the DRIVE headquarters, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year, she's likely to start with a stretch of railroad track behind the building housing the organization's offices, which provides rail access to businesses expected to buy or lease properties there.

The area of track, called a "siding," is set off from the main track to provide opportunity for future businesses to easily ship and receive cargo. **Please see DRIVE page 6**



THE NEW OFFICES of Driving Real Innovation for a Vibrant Economy (DRIVE) are shown along Railroad Street in Danville. The business group is marking its fifth anniversary.

DRIVE

Continued from front page

Rail access, Wakeman said, means that raw goods can be delivered and products can be shipped less expensively than over-the-road transportation.

DRIVE bought the property in 2017 and now is aggressively developing it — providing railroad access and overhauling an access road to the area.

The project was made possible through a \$1 million grant the state Community and Economic Development Department gave the organization in March 2019.

Montour County Commissioner Trevor Finn, a founding member of the DRIVE board, said the project is a great example of integrating diverse resources into an effective operation — with demonstrable results.

“The purchase of that property and its subsequent development is a perfect example of DRIVE’s impact,” Finn said. “The site now has rail access. Vacant buildings are now or soon will be occupied with new opportunities.”

A successful five years

DRIVE was established by the commissioners of Montour and Columbia County as a council of governments “to provide professional staff for project management as well as create a forum for communication and coordination of economic development activity.”

Looking back at DRIVE’s track record over the past five years, Wakeman said she’s very happy, as are the organization’s board members.

In addition to buying and developing the former Metso property, the organization has created jobs and supported business retention.

DRIVE also has partnered with Columbia County Industrial Development Authority to assist in selling lots and development at the Columbia County Business Park.

Wakeman described the area, with its proximity to Interstate 80, “an ideal location for offices or light industrial space.”

DRIVE has developed relationships with other organizations, including Columbia and Montour county officials, the state Community and Economic Development Department, Bloomsburg University and area real estate developers.

Montour County Commissioners Chairman Ken Holdren said, “In its short five-year history, DRIVE has made an incredible impact in Montour County, bringing family-sustaining jobs, robust investments, enhanced Broadband.”

Holdren credited Wakeman with organizing multiple resources to help those wanting to invest in the county.

Ridgway said the organization was a great example of how the two counties can work together with a regional perspective of growing the economy.

Move to a new site

DRIVE bought the former Metso building in 2017, and moved its offices there early last year.

Wakeman said the organization previously rented space in a county property on Woodbine Lane in Mahoning Township. But when the county announced that it planned to sell the property and move its offices to a new annex in Danville, she knew DRIVE wouldn’t be moving with them.

“We work with the county, but we’re not a department,” she said.

So it made sense for the organization to move its offices to a property it already owned and begin development of the land around it.

Columbia County Commissioner Rich Ridgway, who lauded DRIVE for meeting its goal of economic development during its five-year history, said the move to Railroad Street gave the organization a home base from which to spur economic growth in both counties.

Wakeman said developing the Railroad Street property was one of her first projects after being chosen executive director in March 2017.

“It was four buildings and 20 acres of land,” she said. “It was right up the alley of what DRIVE is supposed to be doing,

as it was presented to me by the board.”

The organization’s goal in rehabilitating the site include raising the rail bridge over Sechler Run, drainage improvements and a new rail turnout, in addition to providing improved truck and rail access.

DRIVE plans to lease or sell the properties surrounding its offices to manufacturing businesses, which will benefit from the property’s location and its access to the railroad.

It also offers office space within its main building.

Days Inn

Wakeman said she was especially pleased that DRIVE was appointed as conservator for the former Days Inn at the Danville exit of Interstate 80 in Valley Township this year.

Montour County Commissioner Dan Hartman said DRIVE’s willingness to step into the position of conservator for the property will prevent it from continuing as a blighted property used for illegal activity.

“Security has already been improved and efforts are underway to initiate clean-up and development of the site,” Hartman said. “We are fortunate to have such a well-managed entity providing economic development in the region.”

Wakeman said that while DRIVE doesn’t own the site, as conservator it can enter the property and take needed steps to return it to productive use. One of the first things DRIVE did, Wakeman said, was to put a fence around the entire property to keep people out.

“No one should be on that property,” she said. “There’s no reason for it. It’s unsafe.”

The abandoned hotel sits near several other properties and eateries on or near State Route 54 in Valley Township.

Wakeman said she believes the area, with such easy access to the interstate, often is the first glimpse of Montour County visitors get, and has potential for economic growth.

DRIVE is seeking a business to buy the property, demolish the former hotel and redevelop the land — trans-



MEMBERS of DRIVE, from left, **Tim Hippensteel**, office/project manager; **Jen Wakeman**, executive director, and **Aidan McDonald**, administrative assistant, stand on the new spur lineoff the North Shore Rail Line behind the DRIVE office in Danville. The siding will give businesses in Montour County the ability to load and unload rail freight. **PHOTOS BY JIMMY MAY**

forming it into a profitable asset to the township and the county.

Broadband available

Wakeman also points to a high-speed, wireless broadband internet project, overseen by DRIVE, that has made internet service available to the north side of the county.

Montour commissioners have lauded Wakeman for this efforts in this area, emphasizing the economic and educational benefits access to the internet provides county residents.

The project, completed last year, was funded by Geisinger and established the infrastructure needed for service by third-party vendors.

“Truly high-speed internet is a vital piece of infrastructure that is not available to much of our region,” Wakeman said. “To compete in today’s economy students, employees, and businesses need to have access to broadband both at home and at work.”

Availability originally was based on “line of sight” technology and was sometimes

blocked by buildings or foliage. But during in the past several months, DRIVE facilitated the use of new equipment, making internet access services available to an increasing number of residents. “During the last several months people needed to be online for work and school,” she said. “So it was good timing.”

Business incubator

Wakeman also is excited about sharing office space with Startup Danville, which will provide a place for aspiring entrepreneurs to access high-speed internet, a conference room and efficient work spaces.

The effort, she said, is consistent with DRIVE’s goal of

facilitating growth of small businesses.

DRIVE Board Chairman Dennis Hummer, who also is incubator manager of a similar Lewisburg center, said the program is a collaborative effort of the private sector, an educational institution and government.

Wakeman said the effort was just getting off the ground in March, even scheduling an open house, when the coronavirus broke out.

She expects that the business incubator will see rapid growth in upcoming months.

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