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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, March 22, 2017



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GRUNDY COUNTY ANNUAL CELEBRATION DRAWS LARGE CROWD

MORRIS – A large turnout gathered to celebrate at the Grundy Economic Development Council (GEDC) and the Grundy County Chamber of Commerce & Industry's Annual Dinner held March 21 at the Morris Country Club in Morris.

More than 280 business and municipal leaders, and guests were in attendance to recognize the organizations' award winners and celebrate a successful year for the Grundy County business community.

The event started with Jeff Hettrick External Affairs Manager for ComEd and Chairman of the GEDC welcoming the attendees and thanking them for their support of the two organizations. Morris Mayor Dick Kopczick, addressed the audience, and offered remarks about the importance of the GEDC and Chamber.

The awards presentation immediately followed dinner.

GRUNDY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL AWARDS

Nancy Norton, CEO and President of the GEDC, and Hettrick presented the GEDC awards.

"The GEDC is celebrating its 25th year anniversary this year. That would never have happened without great community support, thank you," Norton said to the crowd.

A special thanks was also extended to CPV Three Rivers Energy, a sponsor of the evening.

Costco Meat Processing Facility – Welcome to Grundy County Award

"Business attraction, one of the key components of economic development, is very competitive. So when a business selects Grundy County as a new location, it is something to celebrate," Norton said. The winner of the Welcome to Grundy County award is Costco Meat Processing Facility located north of Morris on Rt. 47 and behind the existing Costco logistics facility.

"This state of the art facility is one of two plants in the United States that service the Costco stores with hot dogs, ground beef, meatballs and more to come. This facility will ship product to the eastern United States, eastern Canada, Texas and Mexico. In addition to a great facility, I'm happy to report the Costco's lead team was wrong when they estimated 75-100 employees. Right now they have 170 people working there and anticipate 250 employees within a month or two. The plant leadership is enthusiastic and very committed to being part of our community," Norton said. Ritchie Calhoun, Site Manager, accepted the award.

ComEd - Partnership Award

"Prospects and businesses frequently comment about how Grundy County and regional entities work together and the Partnership Award embodies this spirit. There are so many moving parts that all need to come together to be successful in economic development. One thing that many don't think about is power. As I begin my 18th year at the GEDC, right from the start the economic development department of ComEd was by my side introducing me to key players, helping me get training, and most important, filling out extensive questionnaires on power. This department may be relatively unknown among many of you, but I assure you it is on the front line of attracting new businesses to Illinois," Norton said.

"Industrial prospects that are looking for sites ask many questions about the region and the property. Right at the top is the availability and reliability of power. Who knew it was so complicated regarding usage, peak loads, redundancy, and the list goes on and on..... Always thorough and always patient, the economic development team helps us do our jobs and succeed in economic development. Beyond power, they also support our business retention program, Economic Development Bootcamp and much more," Norton said. John McCann, ComEd's Economic and Business Development Manager, accepted the award.

REG Biofuels Seneca - Business of the Year

"REG is the largest producer of biodiesel in the United States, but right here in Seneca the world class biorefinery produces 60 million gallons of biodiesel a year from waste fats and oil. The facility, which started operation in 2008, supports over 60 professional full-time jobs. In just the last five years, over \$31 million has been spent upgrading and investing in the facility. At the helm is Tim Mann, a lifelong Grundy County resident, and a true community advocate," Norton said.

Tim Mann, Plant Manager, accepted the award.

GRUNDY COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AWARDS

Christina Van Yperen, Executive Director and Matt Fritz, Coal City Village Administrator and Chamber Board Secretary presented the Chamber awards. Van Yperen thanked everyone for helping to recognize our local businesses and organizations, big and small.

"It is our pleasure to recognize those who have made a significant contribution to our area and who were nominated by Chamber members," Van Yperen said.

Business of the Year – Big Bash Restaurants

"John Mathias is no stranger to the area owning Big Fish Grille in Channahon for the last 10 years. What you may not know is that he opened the water-side restaurant in the middle of winter during one of our worst economies in recent history. He almost closed its doors twice, but pushed through. By 2015 Big Fish and Big Bash Catering were more than successful. Things were comfortable, and then an opportunity presented itself resulting in John and Maura opening the Morris Chop Shop. As if two restaurants and a catering company was not enough, they opened a third restaurant about a year and half later, Pescillino Osteria. While most of us might call this crazy, John and Maura call it strength in numbers. And this includes their staff of 75 local people, all of which are offered benefits, a 401K, and paid vacation," Van Yperen said.

John sits on the advisory boards for the culinary programs for both WILCO and Joliet Junior College. He soon will serve on the Morris Downtown Development Partnership. Since Big Fish first opened its doors the company has donated to countless local charities and taken active roles in fundraisers for numerous organizations. John Mathias came to the stage accepted the Business of the Year Award.

Entrepreneur of the Year –Michelle Xydakis, Montage Wine Bar & Spirits

"This year's Entrepreneur of the Year actually never intended to be a business owner. If she had followed her original plan, Michelle Xydakis would have been a cop, rather than own one of Morris's busiest hot spots, Montage Wine Bar & Spirits. But Michelle grew up working in a family jewelry store and her

entrepreneurial roots eventually took over. About nine years ago she started working at Montage where working for a local business owner reignited her love for small business. By 2015 she went from employee, manager, partner, to full owner of Montage. Two years later she had grown the business by offering spirits, small plates, and eventually craft beers making Montage a comfortable atmosphere for anyone. It grew so much that the demand for event space to accommodate entertainment and private parties became impossible to ignore. In just three and a half months she and her husband Tony purchased, remodeled, and opened Montage in the former Sklut's store, preserving a 150-year-old downtown Morris building while expanding a local business," Van Yperen said.

"Montage's new location provides an affordable place for local organizations to meet and fundraise, this was a priority to Michelle with the expansion," Van Yperen continued. Montage regularly donates wine and tastings for local raffles and auctions, and supports numerous nonprofits including the hospital auxiliary, YMCA teams, and families of We Care. "Michelle says setting goals is what gives life purpose and when it comes to Montage she has a 'never say never' policy. She keeps this in mind as she strives to put Morris on an even larger map by bringing in nationally known artists this year through the Montage Spotlight Series," Van Yperen said. Michelle Xydakis took the stage to accept the award.

Organization of the Year – Grundy Workforce Services

"Grundy Workforce Services is one of our local organizations that unless you have direct dealings with their staff, you may not be exactly aware of how much they help our county," Van Yperen said. "Whether it's an adult needing their high school equivalency, a young adult looking for a career path, a veteran seeking the right fit for employment – the Workforce Services staff works tirelessly to educate and place their clients with jobs making them valuable members of our community."

In the last fiscal year Grundy Workforce served more than 150 people with their high school equivalency, providing training in high-demand areas, setting them up with internships right here in Grundy County, and just getting them into a better career. That 150 people does not include those who attended workshops, used the computer labs and the free online job boards, or who attended one of their job recruiting events. It also does not include the numerous local businesses who receive quality interns through Workforce that often result in permanent employees. Perhaps one of Grundy Workforce's most unnoticed contributions to our workforce is what is not required of them – helping hundreds of high school students every year to prepare for the real world. They annually work with the GEDC's internship program to provide resume and interview training and Sarah Hintz and her staff are an integral part of the Chamber's Certificate of Employability program, which works improve the future workforce's soft skills starting as young as 14 years old.

When I told Sarah her organization was winning this award, she told me she tells her staff that they are not saving lives, but they are changing them. I beg to differ. When a lost 20-year-old can say they received their GED, or when a single mother is able to provide for her daughter by herself for the first time thanks to your job training, to these people, Workforce Services did save their lives. Sarah Hintz accepted the award.

Ambassador of the Year – Mary Rossio, Joliet Area Community Hospice and Angels of Hope (presented by Fritz)

Chamber Ambassadors serve as liaisons between Chamber members and staff. They gather feedback and answer members' questions during calls and visits they make throughout the year. Many Ambassadors find their participation in this group to be an invaluable tool for making contacts throughout the business community. Mary Rossio became a Chamber Ambassador about eight years ago because she felt it was a special opportunity to educate the community about Joliet Hospice while learning about resources available in the community that her patients and families can utilize. Rossio is the chamber's current Ambassador Chair and a past vice chair. Rossio accepted her award.

Closing

Matt Fritz of the Village of Coal City and Chamber Board Secretary closed the event by reminding everyone this event was a celebration of the strides made in recruiting, retaining and promoting

businesses in and around Grundy County. He thanked the businesses that have grown, entrepreneurs who have taken risks and organizations that serve this county for what they do to make Grundy County a great place to visit, live, work and do business.

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