

Building something extraordinary in Sullivan County

By Sean Kuhn
Staff Reporter

Dr. Theresa Hamlin helped shape The Center for Discovery into a major force in care, research and Sullivan County's economy



The Center for Discovery's campus in Harris, where the organization has grown into Sullivan County's largest employer.

When Dr. Theresa Hamlin arrived at The Center for Discovery in 1983, she came as an educator to an organization with about 30 employees.

Today, she leads Sullivan County's largest employer, with a workforce approaching 2,000.

Hamlin, now president and CEO of The Center for Discovery, will receive the Sullivan County Partnership for Economic Development's Walter A. Rhulen Award on Oct. 8 at Resorts World Catskills. The award, the Partnership's highest recognition, honors business excellence, community commitment and service to humanity.

"I came to The Center in 1983 as an educator, but I could not have imagined where the next 43 years would take me," Dr. Hamlin said.

At the time, The Center had fewer programs and resources, while families of children and adults with complex disabilities often had few options.

"There was far less understanding of autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, complex medical conditions, sensory needs, communication differences and behavior," Dr. Hamlin said.

What kept her there was seeing what became possible when people who had been underestimated re-



Dr. Theresa Hamlin, president and CEO of The Center for Discovery and recipient of the 2026 Walter A. Rhulen Award.

ceived the right support.

"Once you see what can happen when someone who has been underestimated is given the right environment, the right supports and people who truly believe in them, it changes you," Hamlin said. "It gives you purpose."

As The Center grew, its approach to care also changed.

Dr. Hamlin said one of the most important shifts came when staff began looking at education, health-care, nutrition, movement, environment and emotional well-being as interconnected rather than separate concerns.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

TO THE PEOPLE

Laying the Foundation for a Prosperous Future

Whether you're building a house, a commercial facility, or a strategic plan, each requires a starting point; a foundation upon which we build a structure or a plan that guides what happens in the future. The Partnership for Economic Development's mission is to create opportunities for our investors which stimulates economic activity and positively impacts businesses and by extension the community at large. We maximize our economic development expertise to drive private sector projects that foster investment, job creation and long-term financial stability. A wonderful side effect is

that this private sector activity acts as a catalyst increasing payroll, tax rateables and often driving public sector infrastructure improvements that otherwise would never happen.

Over the past decade, The Partnership has been steadily working on the foundational steps needed for economic growth and stability. The following are some of the key accomplishments that are helping lay the foundation for a prosperous future ahead:

- Facilitated the approval of over 4 million sq. ft of private sector preapproved industrial commercial space.
- Provided assistance to a private developer and the Town of Liberty to secure \$21 million in grants which will include improvements to outdated infrastructure.
- Provided contracted facilitative



CEO/President Marc Baez

services to help Sullivan County with its broadband, water/sewer, housing development and marketing efforts.

- Helped secure \$1 million in infrastructure

improvements for market rate housing.

- Once again achieved fastest annual job growth in the region while maintaining unemployment under 4%.

Today we are facilitating 17 current projects in varying stages of approval and development, with 26 members providing the professional work needed to advance them. The projects represent approximately \$1 billion in total investment and over 1,000 new jobs. These activities and others to come will continue the diversification and important growth of our economy.

The Partnership for Economic Development has grown to become one of the premier private economic development associations in New York State. This growth and maturity would not be possible without the support and continued investment of our members and our economic development partners, (SCVA, SCIDA, Sullivan County and the Chamber of Commerce) who have all helped lay the foundation for our continued growth into the future. Building upon this foundation, we are methodically putting together the pieces that will sustain our economy well into the future.

Sincerely,

Marc Baez
President and CEO
Sullivan County Partnership



Sullivan County Partnership
for Economic Development
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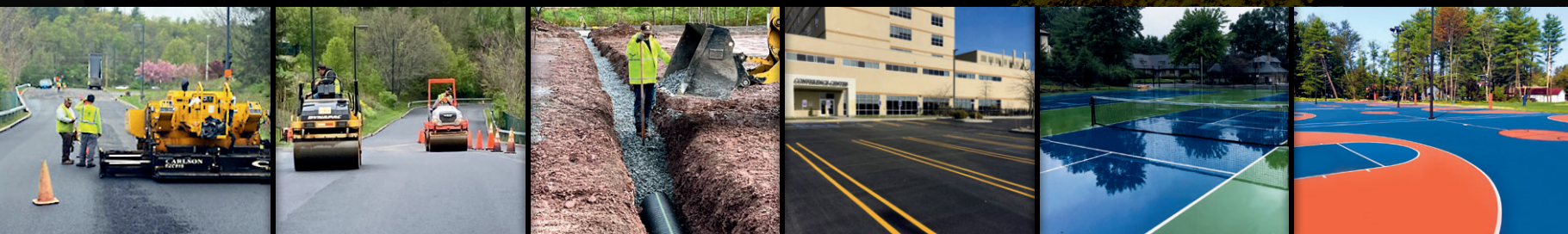
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HAMLIN

Continued from front page

That thinking eventually became SynergE6, The Center's whole-body model of care.

"The problem is that traditional systems tend to separate all of those things," Dr. Hamlin said.

"The SynergE6 model is our way of bringing those pieces together."

Research also became a major part of The Center's development.

"We didn't want to simply believe something was working," Dr. Hamlin said. "We wanted to understand why it was working, measure it, and share what we learned with others."

Dr. Hamlin worked for many years alongside former CEO Patrick Dollard, whose leadership helped guide much of The Center's expansion.

She said Dollard was willing to think big, take risks and challenge



Dr. Theresa Hamlin offers a flower to a participant at The Center for Discovery.

assumptions, while her own background in education and program development kept her focused on what could be learned directly from the people The Center served.

"What we shared was an

unwillingness to accept 'that's the way it's always been done' as an answer," Dr. Hamlin said.

As her responsibilities expanded, Hamlin said she learned to rely on people with expertise beyond her own, trust teams to lead and

continue developing her own skills. She later earned a doctorate in Educational Leadership.

The Center's growth also changed its role in Sullivan County.

In 2024, The Center generated an estimated \$243.4 million in

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economic activity across New York State, according to a TEconomy Partners economic impact study. Its operating expenditures totaled \$151.8 million, with another \$9.2 million in construction and other capital investments.

“Our employees live here. They raise their families here. They shop at local businesses, send their children to local schools and participate in their communities,” Dr. Hamlin said. “That’s economic development, but it’s also community development.”

Partnership President and CEO Marc Baez said The Center’s nearly 2,000 employees give it an economic footprint comparable to that of a major corporate employer.

He said the effects extend beyond payroll through local purchasing, housing, taxes and employee spending.

“That’s an extraordinary number, whether it’s located here or in a large city,” Baez said.

Baez said Dr. Hamlin’s longevity,

The Center’s growth and its continued decision to expand in Sullivan County helped distinguish her for the Rhulen Award.

“She was there every step of the way,” he said.

Baez also sees The Center as evidence that a major healthcare organization can grow successfully in Sullivan County, demonstrating to prospective businesses and investors that companies can find employees, expand and build something significant here.

For Dr. Hamlin, Sullivan County itself helped shape The Center’s model.

Its farms, forests, trails and open spaces created opportunities to integrate nature, movement and meaningful work into the lives of the people it serves.

“Being here gave us the space to think differently about what an environment for health could look like,” Dr. Hamlin said.

The Center’s next stage of growth is already underway.

Its Children’s Specialty Hospital serves children with autism and other developmental disabilities who also have highly complex medical and behavioral needs. Dr. Hamlin said those children often do not fit neatly into existing healthcare systems, leaving families to navigate multiple providers.

“The hospital is no longer simply a promising concept,” Hamlin said. “We are seeing the model work, and the successes are nothing short of remarkable.”

The Center is also developing a Transitional Living Community at the former Frontier Insurance property in Rock Hill.

The project is intended to address the needs of people with complex developmental disabilities as they grow older, including those whose parents or longtime caregivers may no longer be able to care for them.

The location ties The Center’s next chapter directly to the namesake of Hamlin’s award.

Walter Rhulen founded Frontier Insurance Company and built the Sullivan County business into a nationally significant specialty insurer.

“Walter Rhulen was an innovator and a thinker who cared deeply about this community,” Hamlin said. “He took a family insurance business in Sullivan County and developed expertise in areas traditional insurers didn’t necessarily understand. Ultimately, that work became nationally significant.”

Dr. Hamlin said she hopes The Center can continue doing something similar in its own field by taking what it has learned in Sullivan County and helping change the way care is understood and delivered elsewhere.

“Being from a small, rural community doesn’t limit the significance of what you can accomplish,” she said. “In some ways, it can be exactly where something extraordinary begins.”



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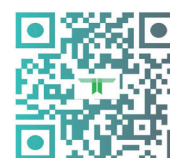
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Building connections across Sullivan County

Fred Stabbert III will receive the Partnership's Distinguished Service Award after nearly 30 years with the organization.

BY SEAN KUHN
STAFF WRITER

Nearly 30 years ago, Fred Stabbert III was having dinner with his father, Fred Jr., at Mr. Willy's Restaurant in Monticello when Howard Siegel approached their table with a suggestion.

"Fred, your son should be on the Partnership board," Siegel told the elder Stabbert.

"And as they say, the rest is now history," Stabbert recalled.

Since then, Stabbert has held every position on the executive committee of the Sullivan County Partnership for Economic Development, served multiple years as board chair and helped guide the organization as its mission expanded.

This year, the Partnership will recognize his service with its Distinguished Service Award during its annual meeting Oct. 8 at Resorts World Catskills.

The award recognizes exceptional service to the Partnership. In announcing Stabbert as this year's recipient, Partnership President and CEO Marc Baez described him as a committed supporter and steady presence within the organization.

"Fred has been a staunch supporter of the Partnership and a calming influence during his long tenure," Baez said. "His thoughtfulness of others both on the board, the community at large and his cheerleading for all things

Sullivan County is truly cherished."

"I believe giving back to the community is very important," Stabbert said. "I personally joined the board because I felt that economic development, and most importantly creating jobs, was vital to the success of our Main Streets in Sullivan County."

When Stabbert joined, the Partnership primarily served as the attraction arm of Sullivan County's economic-development efforts. Staff attended conventions and trade shows to promote the county and recruit businesses.

That role has grown substantially.

Today, the Partnership continues to attract businesses while helping them identify appropriate locations and work through the county's permitting and approval processes. The organization also assists existing businesses seeking to expand or relocate.

"Whether it was helping a business expand, find a new home or attracting a company to Sullivan County, the Partnership has been the conduit to which the business community has turned," Stabbert said.

His own involvement also developed gradually. He began by attending monthly board meetings and quarterly updates before becoming an officer and eventually chair in the early 2000s. He served as chair under former Partnership

President Alan Scott as well as Baez.

Stabbert has also served on several committees, including the Marketing Committee.

The Partnership's relationship with the Sullivan County Democrat also includes Business Edge, its quarterly business publication. The Democrat produces the quarterly special section, which features local businesses, development projects and organizations involved in the county's economy.

That relationship placed Stabbert in two distinct positions as publisher of the Democrat and a member of the Partnership board. He said maintaining a boundary between those responsibilities was essential.

"Having served on many boards throughout my 43-year career at the Sullivan County Democrat, I have learned that you need to separate yourself from your company while you are wearing the hat of board member," he said.

That meant information shared during confidential board discussions could not be carried back to the Democrat newsroom. Stabbert followed the same practice while serving as president of the New York Press Association, as a trustee of SUNY Sullivan, or on the board of Jeff Bank.

"Keeping that information private





PHOTO BY SEAN KUHN

Owner and Publisher of the Sullivan County Democrat
Fred Stabbert III reviews the latest newspaper at his desk. Stabbert is still known to use his trusty rolodex.

was essential to building trust among all the board members and allowing for open and frank discussions about the issues of the day,” he said.

Although the Partnership’s board membership has changed considerably during Stabbert’s tenure, he said its commitment to Sullivan County has remained consistent. According to Stabbert, the Partnership now has 178 member businesses, and they have opportunities to meet throughout the year, learn about one another’s work and develop new business relationships.

“Business is really all about

making connections,” Stabbert said.

He credits the Partnership with helping create thousands of jobs and returning millions of dollars in grants to Sullivan County for infrastructure and business development.

Stabbert also credited Baez, with whom he has served on several other boards, including the Emerald Corporate Center board. He pointed to Baez’s communication skills, leadership and willingness to take on difficult projects.

“Through the board’s strong support, Marc has continued to keep Sullivan County’s name in front of both the business and government

leaders throughout the state,” Stabbert said. “His work, along with many others, has brought millions of dollars in grants back to Sullivan County to improve infrastructure as well as business development.”

Stabbert’s work with the Partnership is one part of a career and record of community service rooted in Sullivan County.

Stabbert began his newspaper career in 1983 and now serves as publisher of the Sullivan County Democrat, which was founded in 1891 and owned by the Stabbert family since 1927. He served as president of the New York Press Association in 2004 and spent nine

years as a SUNY Sullivan trustee.

Stabbert is also secretary of the Jeffersonville Bancorp Board of Directors, president of the Kautz, Thorwelle, Sawyer Scholarship Foundations, a founding director of Sullivan Renaissance and a longtime member and past president of the Callicoon Kiwanis Club. He is also involved with the Callicoon Business Association.

Despite that long record of service, Stabbert said the award came as a surprise.

“I was totally shocked,” he said, “but also deeply honored and humbled to be chosen.”

Stabbert views the honor as recognition of a larger group effort, extending from the Partnership’s staff and board to his colleagues at the Democrat and his own family.

“We are a team at the Partnership,” he said. “While we enjoy each other’s company and have fun at our meetings, we also accomplish much.”

He added that he would not be receiving the award without the support of Baez, the Partnership staff, its board, the people who have worked alongside him at the Democrat and especially his wife of 40 years, Regina.

“My wife Regina has always been my biggest supporter and confidant,” Stabbert said. “She also was instrumental in raising our three children, Laura, Claire and Andrew, while taking on several careers herself. I could not do what I do at work without her.”

“They have all made my success possible,” Stabbert said.

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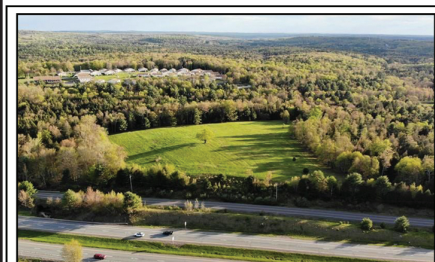
BY MARC BAEZ, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
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An architectural rendering of the new airport main terminal.

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Coming off a year of revitalization, Sullivan County International Airport is positioned to capitalize on the investment that completely rebuilt its terminal into a spectacular facility that captures the soul of the Catskills for pilots and travelers departing and landing there.

With a 6,300-ft runway, 600 acres and room for growth, County officials have positioned the airport to attract more traffic, more investment, and more opportunities in the years to come.

So, what is the likelihood that this will happen soon? One only need to look across the country, where thousands of small and general aviation airports serve communities near or just a short distance from major hubs. While they lack the scale of large international airports these facilities deliver positive returns when appropriately invested in and act as a catalyst for job creation, business attraction, tourism, and regional development.

Real World Examples

A joint report by the National Association of State Aviation and the American Association of State and Highway Transportation Officials found that for every dollar invested in aviation facilities communities see an average return of \$75 through business utilization. In Tennessee, a state DOT study revealed that 70 small and mid-sized municipal airports generate \$20.5 billion in economic impact. In Texas, general aviation airports alone contribute more than 48,000 jobs and \$9.3 billion in economic output. While in Gallatin County Kentucky, population under 8,800, a general aviation airport has already taken pressure off of larger hubs in Louisville and Cincinnati boosting economic development, tourism, and emergency services.

Airports Exhibit Multiplier Effect

Small airports create layers of impact.

Direct: Jobs at the facility

include fuel sales, maintenance, administration, and training.

Indirect: Spending by airport users at local hotels, restaurants, transportation, and suppliers.

Induced: Broader ripple effects occur as employees and travelers spend locally across a variety of economic sectors.

Beyond Jobs

Small rural/regional airports help retain and attract businesses by enabling quick executive travel, emergency services, delivery of specialty goods and services and training. Already we have seen local destinations like the Monticello Motor Club, Resorts World Catskills, the FSH properties and a growing second home community increasingly utilize the Sullivan County Airport for their respective clientele and members. While challenges exist such as funding a variable usage here, the County has been setting the stage through

a multipronged infrastructure investment strategy that will help the airport achieve its growth potential.

Complementary Municipal Investments

Sullivan County has embarked in bolstering its broadband capacity, investing in its roadway network and its sewer and water capacity significantly. When completed, these investments open the door to supporting the airport by attracting businesses in the tech industry, supply chain sectors and new housing developments that will meet the demands of the new economy. This connectivity across multiple fronts serves to attract the types of people, businesses and future opportunities that will continue to grow the airport as a resources for convenient, accessible, and timely transportation. Sullivan County International Airport is surely poised for positive investment and growth well into the future.



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SUNY Sullivan Workforce programs meet the County's growing demand for skilled workers

BY ELEANOR DAVIS

VICE PRESIDENT OF ADVANCEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS, SUNY SULLIVAN

As Sullivan County employers continue to search for qualified workers in healthcare, transportation, and skilled trades, SUNY Sullivan's Workforce Development programs are responding to that need. Through short-term, career-focused training in nursing assistance, emergency medical services, commercial driving, and heating and cooling systems, the college is helping local residents prepare for in-demand jobs, while giving area businesses the skilled workforce they need.

Across its Workforce Development offerings, SUNY Sullivan designs programs around three goals:

- Helping students meet the requirements for licensure or



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

SUNY Sullivan offers a CDL Program which qualifies graduates to operate commercial vehicles, preparing them for jobs with bus companies and other opportunities.

certification,

- Keeping pace with the technology and standards shaping today's workplaces, and
- Building the basic skills and career direction that set graduates up for long-term success.

Four programs in particular: Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Emergency Medical Technician

(EMT), Commercial Driver's License (CDL), and HVAC and Building Controls (in development) illustrate how that approach is translating into real opportunity across the region.

Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)

Launched in Fall 2025, SUNY Sullivan's CNA program completed

its second cohort this past spring. Students gain practical, hands-on skills in patient care including personal hygiene, mobility assistance, and nutrition support, all under the supervision of licensed nurses, combining classroom instruction with supervised clinical rotations. Graduates are qualified to sit for the New York State certification exam for Certified Nurse Aides, which students can do here on campus in our Testing Center. The program is especially well suited to individuals seeking a fresh start or a career change into healthcare, and to those looking for a stable, purpose-driven profession.

Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)

SUNY Sullivan's EMT program includes more than 200 hours of classroom and hybrid instruction, hands-on skills labs, and required ride time, preparing them for the New York State Practical Skills Exam and a career in emergency medical services. Graduates of the program go on to serve Sullivan County in a variety of ways from volunteering with local ambulance corps, joining the county EMS system as working EMTs, to using their certification as a launching pad into Paramedic School or Pre-Med studies. That range of pathways reflects the program's broader goal of giving students a credential they can put to work immediately, while opening the door to further education in emergency and medical care.

Commercial Driver's License (CDL)

Offered regularly to meet local demand, SUNY Sullivan's CDL program gives students short-term, job-focused training with experienced local instructors.

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HVAC and Building Controls (in development)

SUNY Sullivan is investing \$226,000 in Green Jobs and Sustainability funding to build a new instructional HVAC and Building Controls laboratory, supporting both the college's Green Building Technology Associate in Applied Science degree and a stackable Workforce Development pathway. The ten student lab, organized into five two-person instructional teams, will support an embedded HVAC and Building Controls certificate, stackable microcredentials, and NC3-Trane industry certifications. Students will be prepared to apply and compete for Trane HVAC technician

apprenticeships and for entry-level roles in HVAC, refrigeration, heat-pump systems, building automation, facilities operations, and energy management. The technical curriculum will be available both to degree-seeking students and, in an accelerated Workforce Development format, to adult learners, incumbent workers, BOCES graduates, and career changers, with an initial accelerated cohort targeted for Summer 2027.

Together, these programs reflect SUNY Sullivan's commitment to building a skilled local workforce that connects residents to career opportunities while helping meet the workforce needs of Sullivan County employers.

More information about SUNY Sullivan's Workforce Development programs can be found at www.sunysullivan.edu or email contact SCCCworkforce@sunysullivan.edu.

The EMT Program includes more than 200 hours of classroom and hybrid instruction.



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Can Sullivan County make the case for itself?

BY MATTHEW SUSH,
PRESIDENT & CEO, SULLIVAN COUNTY
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

If a business owner called me tomorrow and said, "I'm thinking about moving or starting my business. Why should I choose Sullivan County? What would I tell them? I could talk about our quality of life. I could talk about our communities, our quality of life, and the people who make this County a special place. All of that is true. But it isn't enough.

If we want Sullivan County to compete for businesses, investment, and jobs, we need to be able to make a stronger case for doing business here. And that case can't come from one organization, one town, or one economic development project. It should come from all of us having a better understanding of what is happening across the County and

working together where it makes sense.

I've been thinking about that a lot since taking this position. I've spent time traveling around Sullivan County, sitting down with business owners and community leaders and listening to what they are experiencing. The conversations are different in every community, but I've heard some of the same things over and over. They want people coming through the door, they want their downtowns bustling, they want good employees, and they want to know what is happening in the next community over.

That last part matters more than we think. There is a lot happening

in Sullivan County. The problem is that we don't always know about it. We have plenty of people doing good work. What we need is more connection between them. That is one of the reasons I'm excited about the Sullivan County Community Calendar. On the surface, it is a better way to find out what is happening around the county. But I see it as something bigger.

The calendar will bring events and activities from communities across Sullivan County into one place. That

We have plenty of people doing good work. What we need is more connection between them.

makes it easier for residents and visitors to find something to do, but it can also help direct people toward the businesses and communities around those events. Someone

comes to the county for an event and discovers a restaurant they haven't tried. A family finds a festival and spends the afternoon downtown. A visitor sees something happening the following weekend and decides to come back. Those are small connections. They can have a real impact on local businesses.

The bigger opportunity is connecting the people behind those events and businesses, too. That is where the idea for a Sullivan County Local Business Alliance comes in. I see it as a way to bring local chambers, business associations, downtown and Main Street organizations, tourism partners and others together on a regular basis. This isn't about replacing anyone or telling communities how to do their work.

Every community has its own identity, its own priorities and people who understand those needs better than anyone else. But our challenges don't stop at the town line. To understand these issues,

we should be talking about them together. I want ask our local Chambers: What can we accomplish together that would be difficult for any one of us to accomplish alone? It could be a shared marketing effort, a training program, a business resource, or a stronger countywide voice. Sometimes, it may simply be sharing what we've learned.

I also believe the Chamber needs to spend more time out in the communities. We can't expect every business owner to come to us. We need to go to them. I want to hear what is happening on Main Street, in the office park, at the restaurant, in the storefront and around the kitchen table. That's where you find out what businesses actually need, not what we assume they need.

Economic development isn't only about recruiting the next big employer. It's also about helping the business that is already here make payroll, helping an entrepreneur take the next step, helping fill an empty storefront and giving visitors another reason to stay a little longer.

The Community Calendar is a starting point. The Local Business Alliance is an opportunity to build on that connection. Neither one is going to solve every challenge facing Sullivan County. But both can help us become more connected and better prepared to make the case for our county.

And I keep coming back to that original question. But we need to earn the answer. The best way to make the case for Sullivan County isn't with a slogan or a brochure. It's by building a County where businesses can grow, communities support one another and people see opportunity here. Then, when that business owner calls, we won't have to convince them. We can show them.

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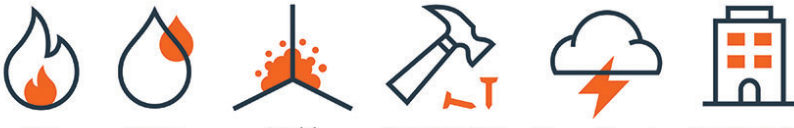


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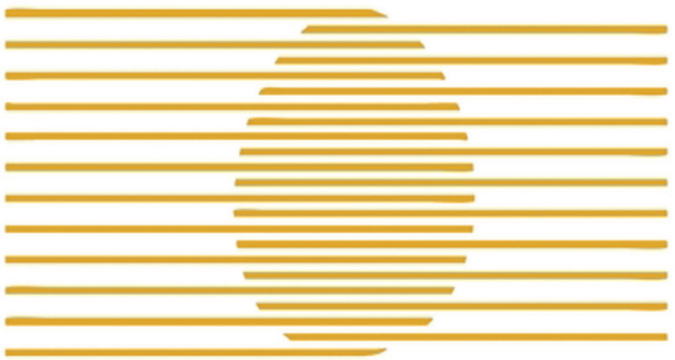
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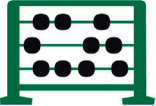
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Outdoor seating brings waterfront views to El Sombrero, allowing guests to look out over White Lake.

Below: Brandon Cerna stands in front of his brand new El Sombrero location in Kauneonga Lake, Bethel.



El Sombrero expands to Kauneonga Lake

BY SEAN KUHN
STAFF REPORTER

Eight years after opening El Sombrero in Rock Hill, the Cerna family has expanded the restaurant to a second Sullivan County location, with Brandon Cerna taking a larger role in running the new location.

The Kauneonga Lake restaurant opened July 17 at the former Barrio Kitchen space on Horseshoe Lake Road.

For Cerna, who began working at his parents' Rock Hill restaurant when he was 18, the new location marks a significant step.

"Honestly, it's a blessing," he said. "To continue my father's legacy, opening up a second location, expanding. It's really something that I feel a lot of gratitude towards."

His father, Luis Cerna, opened the original El Sombrero in Rock Hill in 2018 after years working in the meat business.

Brandon Cerna said his father came to the United States at age 20 and worked at the Hunts Point Meat Market in the Bronx before building a wholesale meat-distribution



Guests enjoy fresh food and drinks on El Sombrero's deck overlooking White Lake.

business. The family later moved to Rock Hill after Sept. 11, 2001.

When El Sombrero opened there, Brandon began learning nearly every part of the operation.

"I did everything, even renovation over there," he said. "Really from the ground up, day by day, just taking it in."

The family had considered expanding to other areas, including Middletown and Spring Valley, before deciding to remain closer to their first restaurant.

"I don't feel like it was a time," Cerna said. "I think we were just looking for the right location."

Kauneonga Lake offered several advantages, he said, including the lakefront setting, proximity to Bethel Woods and an existing customer base already traveling to Rock Hill from western Sullivan County.

"We kept hearing a lot of people were coming from Liberty, from Callicoon and all over the place, and here, White Lake," Cerna said. "We were like, you know what, let's

put a place where people are already supporting us.”

The waterfront location also gave the family a space with an established restaurant layout, though Cerna said substantial work was still required before opening.

The family replaced flooring and worked on the walls, rebuilt the bar and reconfigured both the kitchen and dining room. They enlarged the indoor dining area while reducing the size of the kitchen and bar area.

Infrastructure issues, including HVAC work, created some challenges, Cerna said, but the overall process went relatively smoothly.

He also credited the Town of Bethel with helping the project move forward.

“They were so welcoming,” he said. “They were happy to have us, and once they heard that we were trying to come out here, they made everything possible for us.”

The new restaurant largely follows the same menu and concept as the Rock Hill location.

Some items, including salmon, ceviche, soups and chips and salsa, had not yet been added when Cerna was interviewed, though he said the restaurant plans to expand those



offerings.

The family’s background in wholesale meat distribution remains central to the menu.

“All of our steaks, they’re Choice, hand-cut,” Cerna said.

He pointed to the restaurant’s sampler platter as one of its best-known offerings, combining St. Louis ribs, beef ribs, shrimp, chorizo, skirt steak, chicken breast, tortillas, rice and beans.

While the summer opening brought strong traffic, Cerna is already preparing for the challenge of operating year-round in a community with a large seasonal population.

He said one of his main plans is to enclose the patio and add heaters so the space can remain usable in colder months.

He is also considering karaoke, DJs and seasonal specials to draw

customers through the winter.

“I want to keep this alive during this wintertime,” Cerna said.

The early response, he said, has been encouraging.

“Every time I talk to people, they’re so happy that we’re here,” Cerna said. “They’re like, ‘We love the place in Rock Hill, but this is a lot closer to home.’”

The Kauneonga Lake location has also given Cerna his first opportunity to manage a restaurant with greater independence after years working alongside his parents.

He said watching his father build and maintain the Rock Hill restaurant gave him a clearer idea of the difficulties involved before he took on the second location.

“I could see the challenges he went through and how he overcame them,” Cerna said.

One lesson from his parents, he said, remains especially important.

“Treat everybody as if they’re family,” Cerna said. “Treat everybody with kindness.”

The family may not be finished expanding.

Cerna said they have already received interest in another possible location, although no decision has been made.

For now, he said his focus remains on establishing Kauneonga Lake and building on what his father started.

“I gotta give praise to my father, Luis Cerna, the creator, the mind behind all this,” he said. “Without him, none of this is possible.”



Guests enjoy fresh food and drinks on El Sombrero's deck overlooking White Lake.

EL SOMBRERO

Address: 1 Horseshoe Lake Road,
Kauneonga Lake

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Tuesday-Wednesday: 3-9 p.m.

Thursday-Saturday: 3-10 p.m.

Sunday: 3-9 p.m.

Specialties: Hand-cut Choice steaks and Tex-Mex favorites. A signature is the El Sombrero sampler platter, piled with St. Louis ribs, beef ribs, shrimp, chorizo, skirt steak and chicken breast, served with tortillas, rice and beans and presented with the restaurant’s distinctive

sombrero-and-bells flourish.

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