

Tri-Village Chamber Partnership: New executive director David Polakowski eyes outreach

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The Tri-Village Chamber Partnership's new executive director wants to increase the organization's membership, but not at the risk of compromising services.

On Jan. 6, David Polakowski took over as the group's executive director.

The 54-year-old most recently spent five years as executive director of Downtown Painesville Organization, a nonprofit in Painesville that seeks to revitalize historic communities through preservation and economic-development initiatives.

Polakowski also has ties to central Ohio. His past jobs in the area include being program manager and assistant program chief for the Ohio Department of Health from February 2008 to August 2011; community health-development coordinator for the Licking County Health Department from August 2004 to

February 2008; executive director of Project Open-Hand Columbus from June 2003 to August 2004; and community coordinator for March of Dimes from November 2001 to June 2003.

“I was looking to relocate back to central Ohio,” Polakowski said. “I just missed the area.

“There’s a different atmosphere. Looking at this position, it just felt right.”

Since taking over for Stephanie Evans, who resigned at the end of 2019, Polakowski has sought to reach out to the chamber’s 439 members to make introductions and to get a better feel for their individual business and organization needs, as well as to connect them with other members.

“What we truly are looking at is focusing on our members and our member services,” Polakowski said.

“The biggest asset and benefit of being in the chamber is the ability to network with other organizations.”

Joe Menninger, Tri-Village Chamber Partnership president, said Polakowski was selected from more than 100 applicants.

“David worked previously for the Downtown Painesville Organization as executive director, which is also a member-driven (and) not-for-profit that is run by a board of directors like our organization,” Menninger said. “I joked with David that he wrote his resume specific to our job description, but he didn’t.

“He has significant not-for-profit experience and has worked with and on several boards. He really was a perfect fit.”

The chamber’s 2020 priorities will be ironed out by its membership, marketing and programming and events committees in the coming months.

But Menninger expects a part of Polakowski’s focus will be on membership recruitment “to strengthen and grow an already thriving business community within UA, Grandview and Marble Cliff.”

“We’ve had several years now of strong, consistent membership, are financially strong and have great leadership in Kara Grant and Jacque Engle, who will be president and vice president in 2020,” Menninger said. “We are confident David will continue the positive momentum and continue to make the local business community stronger.”

Polakowski said he’d work with chamber Tony Mazziotti, membership manager, to expand membership, which he said could grow over time to 700- or 800-strong.

But he doesn’t want growth to compromise services to the current membership, which is part of the reason the chamber plans to launch a member survey this year to get feedback about current services and programs, as well as members’ needs.

The chamber also hopes to boost participation in small “Lunch With Us” events held every third Thursday of the month. They’re designed to allow small groups of members to connect and learn more about each other and issues their facing.

“We have a speaker, and we limit it to about 12 (attendees),” Mazziotti said. “It’s so they can learn something about each other. We can have one of our members come in and talk about what they do and how our membership is able to help each other out.

“We try to keep the topics fresh and relevant. There’s some social media. ... The one we just did was more. marketing, in general.”

Additionally, Polakowski wants to tout services like insurance packages the chamber can offer to members through the Southern Ohio Chamber Alliance and a “membership swap” program with the Better Business Bureau.

He also hopes to draw more interest in a podcast the chamber is recording every three weeks to allow members to discuss their businesses and what they have to offer.

“When you’re looking at small businesses, we’re going to be working with them to ensure their futures,” Polakowski said.

“My past five years, I’ve spent a lot of time working with small businesses.

“You want to make sure their best practices and their everyday activities are consistent. We have started meeting with small businesses that have questions, the small nonprofits and helping them reach out and make that connection.”

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