

2025 Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce Awards

Published May 2025 Hamilton, Montana



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Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce celebrates 119th annual Awards Banquet

‘Uncorked, A Toast to Local Success’

RAVALLI REPUBLIC

Every year the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce recognizes local community members for their contributions to the Chamber and greater the Bitterroot Valley business community.

This year, the chamber has selected an outstanding member of the business community for each of the nine awards: Business of the Year, Business Person of the Year, New Business of the Year, Spark Plug Award, Community Asset Award, Economic Development Award, Unsung Hero Award, Volunteer of the Year and Ambassador of the Year.

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce is a nonprofit organization, “dedicated to representing each and every one of

its members while amplifying the collective voice of business in an effort to advocate economic vitality, quality of life and the preservation of the competitive enterprise system.”

The Bitterroot Chamber sponsors several programs and events throughout the year aimed at lifting up individuals and the business community through education and empowerment – such as the Leadership Bitterroot Program, Unstoppable Women series, monthly luncheons, and an Agriculture and Local foods Committee with a mission of ‘Strengthening Bitterroot Valley farmers, ranchers and producers through collaboration, advocacy, and promotion to support our economy, preserve open spaces, and honor our agricultural heritage

for present and future generations,” just to name a few.

The Chamber’s mission statement reads:

“Our business is your business.”

“We will preserve and grow the competitive enterprise system of business by creating a better public, community and state understanding and appreciation of business and economic issues that are facing our members.

The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce will represent our members by proactively communicating, educating, promoting and representing our membership to the general public, to each community in the Bitterroot Valley, to Ravalli County, the state of Montana and the Federal Gov-

ernment of the United States.

We will promptly address issues that are detrimental to the orderly expansion, growth, development and economic vitality of all our business and community members. We will actively promote programs of a civic nature which are designed to increase awareness, functional and aesthetic values of our communities while discovering and correcting abuses which prevent the promotion of orderly business expansion, community vitality, prosperity and responsible growth.”

The Bitterroot Chamber will honor the 2025 award winners at their annual awards banquet, “Uncorked, A Toast to Local Success,” from 6-9 p.m. on Saturday, May 10 at Bitterroot River Inn, Hamilton.

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce staff include:

Executive Director Jodi Mitchell

Membership coordinator Mckaulie Matteson

Administrative Assistant Julie Romano Mock

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce 2025 board officers:

President Sandy Bollom, First Security Bank

President-Elect Liz Cook, Ravalli Republic Newspaper

Treasurer Ryan Williams, Edward Jones

Immediate Past President Nick Jahnke, Farmers State Bank

Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce 2025 board members:

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Kim Bishop, Your Choice Benefits

Dora Bradt, St. Mary’s Mission

Sharon Dedmon, Glacier Sotheby’s International

Melissa Greenwood, Ravalli Electric Co-op

Carol Holman, Nature’s Sunnyside Farms

Gary Mitchell, Trapper Creek Job Corps

Tammy Pauley, Flying S Title & Escrow Company

Mona Quintieri, Allora Massage

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Congratulations to this year’s award winners!

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BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR: *Mary Casper*



JACKSON KIMBALL
jackson.kimball@ravallirepublic.com

Mary Casper, co-owner of the City Center Motel in Hamilton, was awarded this year's Business Person of the Year award by the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce.

Casper told the Ravalli Republic she the award was "really, really meaningful" and that she was incredibly grateful for Hamilton's small-business community.

"When Ryan Williams, who's on the board of the chamber, called me, I teared up immediately," Casper said. "You know sometimes when you're just in the grind and you've got the vision and you're pushing along, you don't see the impact that you're making on a daily basis... To be honored in this way and recognized by, what I consider, a really phenomenal peer group and have that support is just very humbling." Casper and her husband, Greg, took ownership of the motel in March of 2023 and said that, since then, the facility has received a fair deal of positive recognition from Ravalli County and beyond, winning the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce Best Lodging award in 2024, finishing as a finalist in last year's Distinctly Montana Magazine's Motel Competition and winning various other awards and nominations.

Casper and her husband moved to Hamilton from Kansas in 2019 after the couple fell in love with the historic downtown and wanted to "somehow" be a part of the community.

"We came down to the Bitterroot one day and I was standing on Main Street outside of Ford's looking at the Mountains and I said, 'This is it!'" Casper said. "We knew we fell in love with Hamilton because of downtown and that feeling that it creates and that sense of community that is really palpable... We knew we wanted to be a part of that somehow."

Casper, having previously worked with Marriott Hotels, jumped at the opportunity to take over ownership at the City Center Motel and achieve the close connection with Hamilton's downtown business community.

"This is a business where we could bring something really fun, cool and boutique to downtown that Hamilton deserves," Casper said. "We realize that running a property like this has an economic impact for all of downtown... We really are focused on how we can be successful so we can help dollars be spent downtown."

Casper said that she would continue to upgrade and improve upon the experience offered by the motel, explaining that the facility is undergoing an extensive remodeling project.

"We have fully renovated four of the 14 rooms that we have and we're going to continue on that process," Casper said. "We are really focused on remodeling the interior rooms so that guests are wowed when they open the door."

Jackson Kimball is the local government reporter for the Ravalli Republic.

PROVIDED PHOTO

Mary Casper, co-owner of the City Center Motel in Hamilton said that the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce's award for Business Person of the Year was "really, really meaningful."

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NEW BUSINESS OF THE YEAR:

Darcy Hansen State Farm Insurance

JACKSON KIMBALL

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Darcy Hansen, winner of the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce New Business of the Year for 2025, has been a State Farm insurance agent in Stevensville since 2021. She told the Ravalli Republic that she “was so honored” to receive the award.

“I had fears and doubts in taking this leap of faith,” Hansen said. “But I pursued on with treating others the way I wanted to be treated and loving the community the way I believe I should.”

Hansen said that she and her husband, who are originally from western Nebraska, visited Stevensville in 2020. When visiting, Hansen said she felt motivated to stay and pursue a different career path. “One night we got to Montana and I just felt like I was being called to a different career,” said Hansen. “It’s funny because I don’t think anyone thinks their calling is insurance.”

Hansen worked in long-term care before being contacted by a State Farm recruiter

who presented her with the opportunity to work as an agent in Stevensville. Hansen returned to Stevensville in 2021, purchasing the building at 300 B Main St. from a local travel agency and remodeling the building into her current State Farm office.

“When we opened we had no customers, we were starting fresh in a place that I was new to,” Hansen said. “I was taking a big leap of faith and that’s what I wanted to do... it’s just been wonderful. Ever since I opened up, the community has embraced me.”

Hansen said that being an insurance agent has allowed her to assist and support her neighbors and said that she felt her work was reflected back to her by the acceptance of her community members.

“I do a lot of for the community because it’s important to me,” Hansen said. “I have all these customers that live here that pour into me and it’s important that I pour back into them.”

Hansen said that her initial doubts of relocating to Stevensville and starting her

new career path were soon quelled after becoming more closely acquainted with community members and being recognized with this award from the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce.

“The way I was raised was you give back to your community,” Hansen said. “I feel like this is the community seeing that and saying, ‘We see you and we thank you.’”

Hansen also expressed gratitude for her team and the network of individuals she’s established close ties with since starting her business.

“I was honestly so nervous coming here and starting a career in something new,” Hansen said. “Fast forward to 2025 and I’ve got a team, I’ve got a community that I love and I’m being honored with this award... even though it was hard, there are great things that came from it and this award is one of those things.”

Jackson Kimball is the local government reporter for the Ravalli Republic.



PROVIDED PHOTO

Darcy Hansen said she was “so honored” to receive the New Business Person of the Year Award from the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce.



Congratulations, Mary Butt!

We are thrilled our very own, Mary, has been recognized as the Chamber's Ambassador of the Year!

Thank you, Mary, for your outstanding service and leadership – this recognition is so well deserved!

Edward Jones

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Debbie Gantz

Financial Advisor



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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AWARD: *Julie Foster*

NICOLE GIRTEN

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People will sometimes ask if Julie Foster, Executive Director of the Ravalli County Economic Development Authority, tries to recruit large companies to set up shop in the Bitterroot. The answer is no.

Foster told the Ravalli Republic it would take a budget she doesn't have, but also would go against the rural way of growing from within.

"We work with a lot of companies who I've had a 20-year relationship with," she said. "Some of those companies started with one or two people as a family operation, and now they have 20 or 40 employees." The Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce is now honoring Foster with the Economic Development Award and she will be celebrated among other category winners at the organization's annual banquet. Foster said she was "incredibly grateful" for the honor.

Foster started her business journey with her own Internet business in 1995, Bitterroot Internet, and went on to serve on the original board of the Economic Development Authority which formed in 1997.

As Executive Director of a three-person organization Foster says she has a hand in everything from writing infrastructure grants, helping manage their \$4 million loan program or run their facility leased to 23 businesses.

These companies range in size — from pharmaceutical manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline to one-person operations — but many of them started in homes in the community and expanded into this space, Foster said.

It's a misconception GlaxoSmithKline was asked to come to the Bitterroot, Foster said.

"The truth is, they grew from here," she said.

Business advice from her team is available to them for free.

"I think we're really good at just meeting them where they are with what they need," she said. "Maybe that's help with business planning or doing financial projections, or maybe it's just brainstorming about what's going right and challenges."

She works to connect these businesses to the community in the Bitterroot, and said seeing businesses grow is "incredibly rewarding."

The Bitterroot is the "best place to be," she said, because of how the community



PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIE FOSTER

Ravalli County Economic Development Authority Executive Director Julie Foster.

works together and she knows she can call the county or the board of the authority to help solve a crisis.

"You can be heard and and you can understand that people care, and you're not just like flung to the wind," she said.

Foster said she wants to retire in the next four years, but is excited about some upcoming projects still to come like the Bitterroot Food Innovation Center micro-food processing center.

But Foster just wants to leave the organization in a good place, but she understands growth takes time.

She said she's happy her board is able to see the authority get recognized by the chamber.

"All the time that they spend is seen and recognized," she said. "Even though you feel like you're just zooming down the path every day doing so much you forgot what you did 15 minutes ago — that people see you."

Nicole Girten is the education reporter for the Ravalli Republic.



Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce
SPARK PLUG AWARD WINNER!

**Dyana
Canavan**

Special Congrats to our very own **Business Development Manager, Dyana Canavan!**





PHOTO COURTESY OF STEFANI JACKSON

Stefani Jackson, founder of Loads of Dignity.

UNSUNG HERO AWARD: *Stefani Jackson*

NICOLE GIRTEN

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Stefani Jackson founded Loads of Dignity, a nonprofit which pays for homeless people to do their laundry, six years ago after thinking of how others don't have the luxury of doing laundry from home like she did.

The Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce is recognizing Jackson with the Unsung Hero Award and she will be celebrated among other category winners at the organization's annual banquet.

Jackson told the Ravalli Republic she feels "honored" the chamber selected her for the award. Her nonprofit works out of the Washboard Laundromat in Corvallis and provides detergent, fabric softener and hygiene bags for clients.

"The whole circle of dignity for them," she said.

She said they had almost 300 patrons before the business moved from Hamilton to Corvallis.

One customer, a seventh-grade kid, once spun around and asked Jackson, "Can you smell that?" which confused Jackson at first, and she responded "No." He spun and asked again, and Jackson again said she didn't smell

anything.

"Well, that's the smell of my clothes," Jackson recalled him saying.

She said it was "amazing he would even think that."

He also liked the Bombas socks she handed out, she said. The company says it gives a piece of apparel away for every item purchased.

She started the business after losing her job in healthcare due to her epilepsy. While on disability she was at home and would clean — or sometimes pretend to — before her husband returned from work, she said.

"I got up and walked five steps with my laundry and I thought, oh goodness, a lot of people can't do this — be able to wash their laundry," she said.

She decided then she was going to take a leap of faith and see if a laundry nonprofit could work in the Bitterroot.

"And it did," she said.

Jackson hopes to one day own a laundromat, but said she's currently some ways from that. For now, her goal is to keep running the nonprofit.

Nicole Girten is the education reporter for the Ravalli Republic



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VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR: *Sean Doyle*

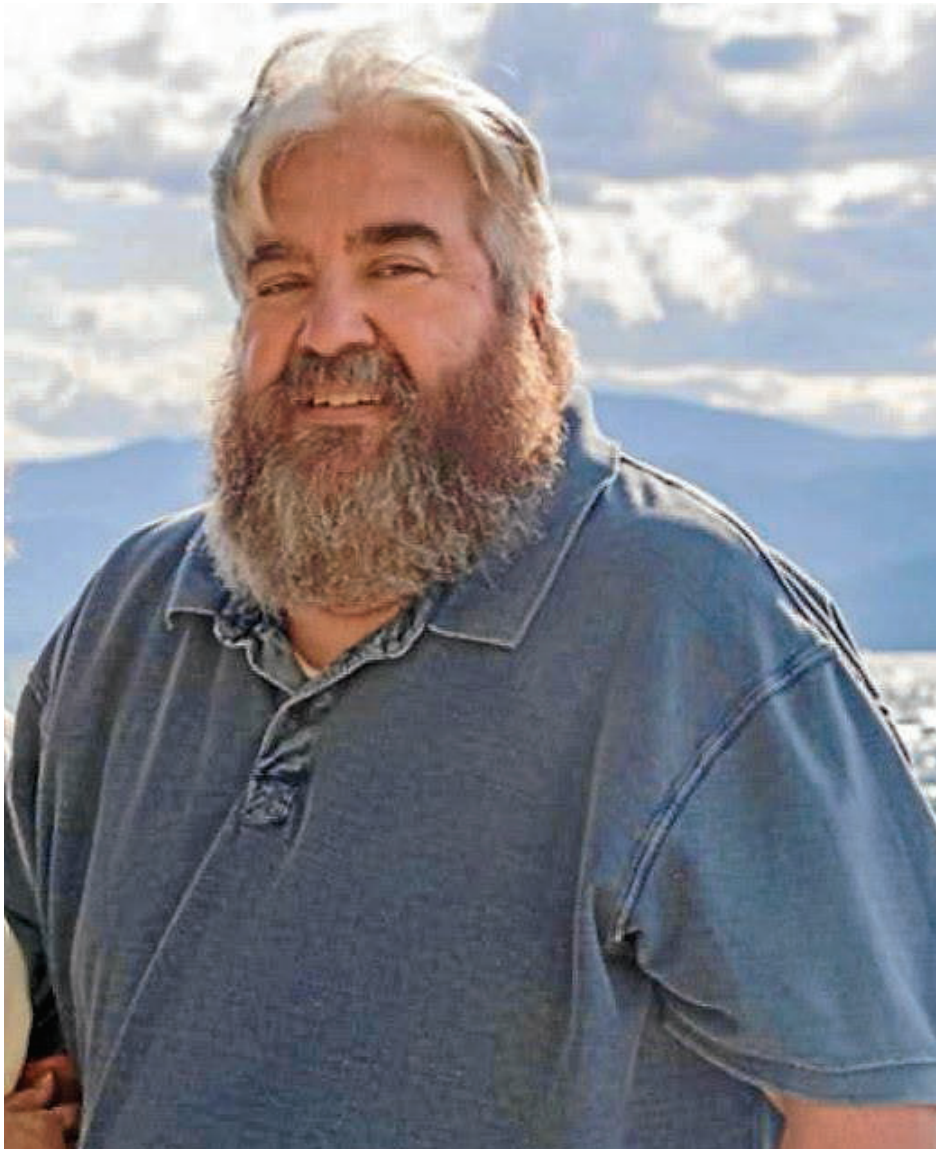


PHOTO COURTESY OF SEAN DOYLE

Stevensville Civic Club President Sean Doyle.

NICOLE GIRTEN

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Sean Doyle says it may be cheesy, but the reason why he does all the volunteer work as President of the Stevensville Civic Club is seeing other people enjoying the projects and events they put on.

He was exhausted at last year's annual Creamery picnic, the organization's biggest event, but was caught in a photo grinning ear-to-ear watching others enjoy themselves, Doyle said.

"That's the part that really makes it worth it," Doyle told the Ravalli Republic.

The Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce honored Doyle as their Volunteer of the Year and he will be celebrated among other category winners at the organization's annual banquet. Doyle said his selection was a "total surprise" to him and he was grateful to be recognized.

Doyle moved to Stevensville with his family in 2019 and volunteered for the first time in the community during that year's Creamery picnic at the beer tent along with his wife.

"We had an absolute blast," he said. "It was watching other folks volunteer, and seeing how much fun it was, that really made us, and myself particularly, continue to want to do it."

He then joined the Civic Club and his wife started volunteering with youth soccer and they've been involved in the community ever since.

Doyle became President of the organization in 2022 and helps put on big events in Stevensville each year – including the 4th of July PIGnic BBQ, the Parade of Lights in December and of course the Creamery Picnic, a two-day festival and 114 year Stevensville tradition.

"That one's big because we take over different parts of Stevensville," he said. "That's

"We had an absolute blast. It was watching other folks volunteer, and seeing how much fun it was, that really made us, and myself particularly, continue to want to do it."

the big one that takes us months and months to put together."

He said on that weekend he can expect to work 10-12 hours a day, but seeing people to the line dance from Footloose on main street, coming out of pig races laughing and covered in mud, and kids playing carnival games makes it all worth it.

His kids, 14 and 15 year-olds, are also active volunteers with the American Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary Juniors.

"It's kind of become a family thing these days," he said.

Doyle said he hopes Stevensville keeps its "volunteer spirit."

"We have a lot of fairly long standing traditions," he said. "My fear is, without the folks that are moving here getting involved seeing that history, seeing those traditions and not wanting to volunteer, is that they'll eventually fade and go away?"

He said volunteering is a "team sport."

"That's the part that I think everybody kind of needs to remember, is it takes more than just a few," he said.

Nicole Girten is the education reporter for the Ravalli Republic.

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BUSINESS OF THE YEAR: *Mission Bistro*

JACKSON KIMBALL

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Mission Bistro in Stevensville has been named 2025 Business of the Year by the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce.

The restaurant, co-owned by siblings Angie and Eric Loessberg, has been serving Stevensville since 2012.

Loessberg said that she and her brother were both honored to receive the award and said that it was an “acknowledgment” that their patrons and neighbors appreciated all the work they’ve put in over the years. “For us it’s about how important the community has been for us,” co-owner Angie Loessberg told the Ravalli Republic. “And our community recognizes us and appreciates that we’re here and we have so much gratitude for the community. It just does mean a lot.”

The sibling owned and operated establishment began in a house in Stevensville and, according to Loessberg, had seen “a lot of life” since its inception.

“June will be 13 years of being in business,” Loessberg said. “It’s crazy. A lot of life has happened.”

The Loessbergs grew up in Stevensville but both moved away in their early adulthood to pursue careers elsewhere. Eric, who is the head chef at Mission Bistro, studied culinary arts in Seattle, living and working there for ten years before returning back to Montana.

Angie said that she, similarly, moved away and lived in multiple parts of the country like Missoula, Seattle and Massachusetts before returning to the valley. Loessberg said the siblings eventually ended up reconvening in Stevensville by coincidence.

“I was living out on Martha’s Vineyard,” Loessberg said. “I came home for the summer to spend with my folks and that turned into, ‘Oh! It’s really nice here. I really enjoy being home,’ so I ended up staying. It wasn’t a planned thing at all.”

Loessberg said once reunited, she and her brother started a makeshift version of the restaurant in a house but soon bought a closed down coffee mill and converted the space into the current version of Mission Bistro.

“We tore it all apart and rebuilt it,” Loessberg said, mentioning that she used to work in the coffee mill before it was closed down and converted into the Bistro.

“When we came in, they had left all their stuff, so it was exactly how it was when I



DONNIE SEXTON

Siblings Angie and Eric Loessberg are the proprietors of Mission Bistro in Stevensville.

worked there,” she said. “Everyone was like, ‘This is where I first met you and now, you’re here with your restaurant!’”

Loessberg emphasized how grateful she was for the restaurant to be immersed and embraced by Stevensville, saying it’s been “so special.”

“Just to get back to the community part, it’s been so special for me personally having customers that we have seen get married, sometimes even cater their wedding, and then they start having families,” Loessberg said. “And to just watch them grow and age with us, it’s like everyone is part of our family. We’ve lost a lot of customers that we’ve had for many years, due to passing and it’s heartbreaking and we cry. Many of my employees have created very meaningful relationships with our customers with whom they are now friends.”

“As well as thanking the community, we need to thank our employees. We’ve had some amazing employees who have helped keep it going so that me and my brother can go and cater and stuff... having a solid kitchen staff that runs the show has just been absolutely amazing.”

Angie Loessberg

Loessberg said that she and her brother were also just as appreciative of their kitchen staff, crediting them for the award as well.

“As well as thanking the community, we need to thank our employees,” Loessberg said. “We’ve had some amazing employees

who have helped keep it going so that me and my brother can go and cater and stuff... having a solid kitchen staff that runs the show has just been absolutely amazing.”

Jackson Kimball is the local government reporter for the Ravalli Republic.

AMBASSADOR OF THE YEAR: *Mary Butt*



PROVIDED PHOTO

JESSICA ABELL
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Mary Butt, senior branch office administrator at Edward Jones in Hamilton, has been named 2025 Ambassador of the Year by the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce.

Butt has been with Edward Jones for 18 years and enjoys helping clients with their finances, including pro bono work. Butt said that “just serving people, helping them with their finances,” is her favorite part of the job.

“We help clients of all types,” she said. “And we’re always there to lend helpful support for them in their financial needs.” Butt has been an ambassador for the Chamber of Commerce for over five years, volunteering at various events and

promoting community engagement. Butt said she enjoys volunteering and being a face for the chamber during events like banquets, brew fests, and ribbon cuttings.

“As an ambassador, it involves a lot of volunteering, which I love to do in the community,” she said. “It gets me out to meet all our wonderful businesspeople in our area and learn about their businesses.”

Butt highlighted the benefits of chamber membership for local businesses, particularly the networking opportunities it provides.

“The chamber is a great place to be a participant, it’s a great representation of our community,” Butt said. “It’s a great way to network with other businesses in our community.”

“The chamber is a great place to be a participant, it’s a great representation of our community. It’s a great way to network with other businesses in our community.”



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BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

UPS Store
Double K Ranch
Super One Foods

COMMUNITY ASSET AWARD

MAPS Media Institute
Loads of Dignity
Ravalli Services

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

Nick Jahnke
Courtney Hartelius
Liliana Pennington
Double Black Diamond Gals

BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR

Pam Suarez - Flower Happy
Dillon Kouf - Double K Ranch

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AWARD

Bitterroot College Program
Ravalli Services

SPARK PLUG AWARD -

Ryan Williams
Darcy Hansen

NEW BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

True North Primary Care
City Center Motel

UNSUNG HERO AWARD

Michelle Nowling at the Ravalli County Museum
Ariella Wells - Bitterroot Early Learning Network

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SPARK PLUG AWARD: *Dyana Canavan*

JESSICA ABELL

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Dyana Canavan, business development manager at Partners in Home Care, is being honored by the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce with their 2025 Spark Plug Award.

Canavan has been with Partners in Home Care for nearly two years where she works with various facilities such as doctor clinics, senior living facilities, and medical practices.

“I work with facilities providers and the community educating people about all the different service lines we have,” she said. “Right now, we’re also opening, the beginning of June, Western Montana’s first inpatient hospice center.”

Canavan said the 12-bed inpatient hospice center, located in Missoula, will provide clinical care and has the potential to expand in the future. The center is funded by the Hope Foundation and will be operated by Partners in Home Care.

Canavan is part of the chamber’s Leadership Bitterroot program, which she described as “eye-opening.”



“It allows for us to get out and learn about all the different organizations and companies in the Bitterroot” she said. “There’s so much I didn’t know that was out there.”

Canavan serves as an ambassador for the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce, attending ribbon cuttings and supporting

other organizations. She said she appreciates the camaraderie and support within the chamber.

“I love the group at the chamber,” Canavan said. “They’re very personable, they they’re so supportive.”

“What I’ve noticed with the chamber here in Ravalli County – it’s filled with really, a special group of people that I can see that they want to watch each other succeed, and they’re really genuinely happy for each other. And I love being part of that,” Canavan said. “I believe in lifting others up. I don’t like that good-old-boy club or anything like that. I really like people, and business is a passion of mine, so I love it.”

Canavan finds the most rewarding part of her involvement with the Chamber of Commerce is seeing the smiles on people’s faces and watching others succeed.

“It encourages you to do better and do more, and it’s just really a part of the community,” Canavan said. “I’m a veteran. I was in the army, and there’s a camaraderie of people I’ve always been part of. I like being a part of the greater good for

“It encourages you to do better and do more, and it’s just really a part of the community. I’m a veteran. I was in the army, and there’s a camaraderie of people I’ve always been part of. I like being a part of the greater good for everybody, because when you see smiling faces and a happy community, that’s rewarding.”

everybody, because when you see smiling faces and a happy community, that’s rewarding.”

Shoutout to our incredible Chamber Award winners!

You’re rocking it — leading, inspiring, and making big things happen. Let’s keep the momentum going!

The Paper Clip

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*Where Montana Began
Historic St. Mary’s Mission*

Congratulations to all the 2024 Chamber Award Winners!

Your hard work, leadership, and commitment to our community inspire us all. We’re proud to celebrate your achievements!



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COMMUNITY ASSET AWARD: *O'Hara Commons & Sustainability Center*

JESSICA ABELL

jessica.abell@ravallirepublic.com

The O'Hara Commons and Sustainability Center in Hamilton is being honored by the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce with their 2025 Community Asset Award.

O'Hara Commons is celebrating its 10th year as a nonprofit organization, empowering a resilient community of local growers and consumers through education and resource sharing, particularly focusing on local food issues.

"It's a really special year for this to happen," said Executive Director Samantha O'Byrne.

"We have a lot of moving pieces on the ground, and we are so invested in the community and in our partnerships and in the process of working with people," she said. "We recognize that good, strong programs can take a long time to build up over the years. We are so honored to have developed trust within the community and with the programs that we develop. We are invested in sustainable programs. We never want to waste any resources, so we put a lot of thought into the due diligence and the development of programs that are truly a benefit to the community." The O'Hara Commons' local food programs serve over 5,520 households per year and benefit more than 65 producers per year. They also process more than 40 tons of local food per year through their facility.

But none of this could be accomplished without the dedication and support of their "incredible" volunteers, O'Byrne said. In fact, volunteers logged over 1,800 hours working with the organization.

The O'Hara Commons plans to launch a 10% local-food challenge in June. The challenge aims to encourage community members to invest 10% of their food budget in local foods. O'Byrne called it a fun awareness and engagement program for community members encouraging them to keep their food spending in Ravalli County.

"That's money that's staying in our community and circulating in our community, so, we're really excited about launching that program," she said.

The organization has a year-round online farmers market, with in-person markets from June through September, and manages a five-acre mixed fruit tree orchard, collaborating with local organi-



JESSICA ABELL, RAVALLI REPUBLIC

O'Hara Commons Director of Programs and Outreach MacKenzie Brosious delivers a CSA box to a customer on Thursday, March 27.

zations to improve food access and reduce waste. "We're in our fourth year of managing and restoring this old orchard," O'Byrne said. "We use it as an outdoor classroom. We use it to get great fruit into community members' houses. We have a no waste campaign with our orchard. We're really strong advocates of minimizing food waste. So our old Blue Moon orchard, to keep it a sustainable program, we have A-grade fruit that we will sell. We have B-grade fruit that we donate to the community — that's just a fruit that has blemishes. Then the C-grade fruit goes to people who are raising animals

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and livestock.”

O'Hara Commons has been working to build their refrigeration resources and recently received a grant for a refrigerated cargo van to enhance food security from the Montana Department of Agriculture, allowing the organization to shift the focus to a broader food-hub emphasis.

“So we're able to work with other food hubs and develop distribution routes to make sure that our state and our region and our community has secure food has food security,” O'Byrne said. “That's our focus really, is on local food and preserving agricultural lands as well as ensuring that there's equitable access to local food, because we all know that local food is the most nutritious.”

The van will improve efficiency in the online farmers market, ensuring a safe cold chain for produce. O'Hara Commons plans to develop additional food hubs to

expand local food distribution, especially in areas like Darby and Stevensville and is starting a pilot program with Western Montana Growers Co-op this summer to establish a distribution route to Salmon, Idaho.

O'Byrne said the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce is a valuable resource for community outreach and building the local food environment, adding “they're great partners, and they just do so much for the greater community.”

“The Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce has just been really a fantastic resource for us in doing outreach, and I really appreciate how much interest that they have in building the local food environment, because it's something that we've been working really hard on for 10 years,” O'Byrne said. “To have other organizations, especially the Bitter Root Valley Chamber of Commerce, join forces with us, we are all together going to be that much more successful in preserving local agricultural lands and these family traditions.”

Scyntiya Bower devours a delectable morsel at the O'Hara Commons Midweek Farmers Market in Hamilton.

PROVIDED PHOTO BY SAM O'BYRNE



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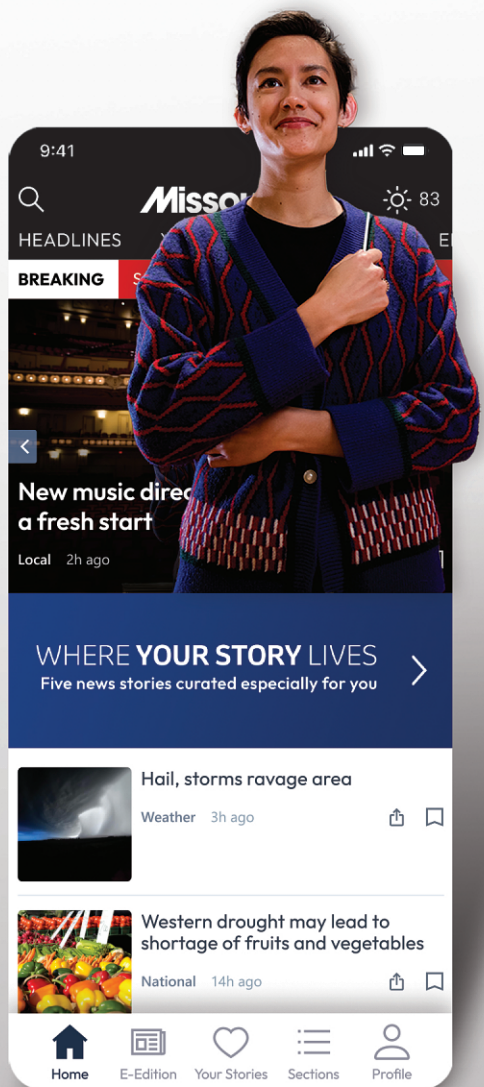
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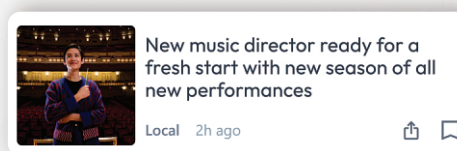
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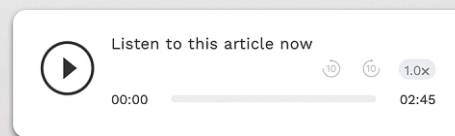
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