2020 has been one for the history books. Through the pandemic, political and social unrest, economic turmoil and all the stress created therein, our community and region have learned they possess a strength they had never known. While there have been struggles and heartache, there is also teamwork, perseverance, compassion, ingenuity, and grace.

The Greater Freeport Partnership halted nearly all regular in-office operations in March 2020 (as most organizations did) and shifted its focus to providing current information on relief efforts and recovery assistance, serving the needs of our businesses and community. These efforts took shape through communicating grant programs and relief packages, hosting webinars for further clarification, publishing new web and informational tools, and listening intently to the needs of our members. We executed our mission in novel, relevant ways to fit the needs of those who were strained by disruption. In the face of adversity, we adapted for the success of Freeport and Stephenson County, its business and our members. The Partnership’s new Executive Director was hired and started on May 11, 2020.

There are several thoughts of how and where new business and self-employment opportunities will rise from our pandemic induced economic crisis. Regardless of where the "place" of the worker or business is located, it will be paramount that we establish an Entrepreneurship Ecosystem that underpins and supports not only sustainable but agile business development. For this reason, staff began mapping out the existing entrepreneurship resource network and identifying the service gaps. The intent is to organically grow the services locally, connect to and leverage regional services and connect to services virtually outside the region.

Several value-added agriculture/food producers in Stephenson County started expansion of their production operations. While most other essential manufacturers remained steady with minor disruptions, our members.

Overall, we executed our mission in novel, relevant ways to fit the needs of those who were strained by change. In the face of adversity, we adapted for the success of Freeport and Stephenson County, its businesses and our members.

C. Mark Williams,
Executive Director
MEMBERSHIP BASE

**Not for profit/Government:** 20.2%
**Premier Partner:** 3%
**Major Partner:** 6.8%
**Basic:** 68%
**Subsidiary:** 2%

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

- **Business Events**
  - 10 Live Events
  - 5 Virtual Events

- **Entrepreneur Engagement**
  - 15 Entrepreneurs
  - 25+ Contacts

- **Ribbon Cuttings**
  - 16 Businesses

- **Webinars**
  - 7 Hosted

- **WEN**
  - 49 Members
  - 17 Events

MARKETING & PROMOTIONS

- **Visitor Center 2020 Attendance:** 16,336
- **Gross Visitor Center Sales:** $35,800
- **Average hotel occupancy rate:** 39%

Redesigned greaterfreeport.com web site with new features including:
- Directory options
- LOIS site selector database
- Stephenson County data portal
- Professional video highlighting economic development, tourism and resident life

Redesign and COVID-19 content increased web traffic by 300%

Social Media Engagement

- **Facebook**
  - 8.3k followers
  - 24,800 average monthly reach

- **LinkedIn**
  - 956 connections
  - 3,500 average monthly impressions

- **Instagram**
  - 1.1k followers
  - 1,100 average monthly reach

- **Twitter**
  - 2.8k followers
  - 3.6k average monthly impressions
GRANT-FUNDED PROGRAMS

** Beautification **
- Awarded in 2019, from the Freeport Community Foundation, the #FreeportReflections program is an art activation program for vacant storefront spaces in downtown Freeport. The goal of the program is to attract new attention to these underutilized spaces, with the ultimate goal of them being leased. The grant award funded 5 installations. Since the program launched in the 3rd quarter, 2 of the 5 spaces have been leased and the art installation has been relocated to a new vacant storefront. We look forward to this project continuing into 2021.
- Community Foundation of Northern Illinois awarded $20,774 in late 2019 to pay for 6 new streetscape benches and 15 litter receptacles. In partnership with the City of Freeport Public Works Department, these furniture pieces were installed in the 1st Quarter of 2020.

** Business Support Services **
- Awarded $9,590 in grant funds from the Illinois Department of Human Services for Census Outreach and promotion to ensure every resident of Stephenson County was counted once and in the right location. Final report was completed June 1, 2020.
- Awarded a $10,000 from the Freeport Community Foundation from the NWIL COVID-19 Response Fund to encourage local spending. We utilized the grant award in conjunction with our Partnership Cash Program to leverage the $10,000 award into $20,000 of local spending at area businesses.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

As businesses worked to adapt, regroup, and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Partnership responded with persistent outreach and innovative programming to serve businesses, consumers and residents.
- The Partnership Cash program reached new capacity in March with the help of a grant from the Freeport Community Foundation. $20,000 of Partnership Cash was offered to consumers at a 50% discount. All $20K sold out in less than 18 hours. A second wave of Partnership Cash was offered for holiday spending totaling $22k. Partnership Cash guarantees that more than $42,000 will be spent with local businesses.
- The Freeport Clean Hands, Open Doors program is part of a regional effort to reinstate consumer confidence in local businesses, restaurants and stores. More than 50 organizations and businesses took the pledge to adhere to health guidance.
- Dozens of new web site pages were created on the Partnership’s Recovery & Reopening site providing guidance for each business and industry.
- Grant opportunities and loan information provided in email announcements, web site updates, personal phone calls, one-on-one consultations, and member wellness checks.
- Worked closely with Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and Illinois Department of Employment Security to provide timely information to business owners, employers and employees.
- Facilitated and hosted webinars covering topics related to the Paycheck Protection Program, business relief opportunities, and unemployment options.
- Modified annual events to provide sales potential for restaurants and retailers.
  - Cruise Night adapted to become Cruise-Only Cruise Night. Featuring over 350 cars and 1,500 spectators, the route was expanded from Downtown Freeport to Park Street to allow for social distancing.
  - Music on Chicago featured live, local bands as a virtual event at different downtown restaurant locations each month. A virtual tip jar was collected and all proceeds were sent to local non-profit organizations.
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Distributed 100 grant opportunities to over 30 partner agencies and public sector partners.
- Continued to connect area employers to Probation Job Readiness class graduates. This class was designed to target soft skills training and give individuals tools needed to deal with conflict on the job, with the goal of sustaining employment. Two class cohorts were able to complete the program before COVID forced the program into hiatus. Five area employers continue to engage with the program. Met with Probation Department and Highland Community College in 4Q to see how the program could transition to an online format. The program has restarted in all virtual format; the first class will graduate in February 2021.
- The first Downtown Revitalization Loan Fund applicant had their project approved in March. We have presented the opportunity to three other interested parties.
- Referred 13 interested parties to building owners and/or realtors representing building owners about leasing/buying downtown properties.
- Other economic development milestones for 2020:
  - $10 million in building permits for the City of Freeport
  - Waiting on data from the County.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TRAILS

The Partnership created a trail study examining Stephenson County trail use and economic impact as local agencies discuss future improvements and infrastructure. The study targeted non-motorized traffic (hiking, biking), however some Stephenson County trails are used by motorized equipment as well. The trail study was presented live to the Jane Addams Trail Commission and the Freeport City Council and Stephenson County Board via recorded file. The presentation was also distributed to partner members.

The trail study included use data as provided by trail counters from Blackhawk Hills Regional Council comparing different access points on the trail year-over-year. Usage was up by 20 percent in the first five months of 2020 over previous years. Testimonials and survey results were included from trail users demonstrating strong support for the trails. Most notably, 100 percent of Jane Addams Trail users will come back to the trail again.

Trail systems are a positive asset to our community as:
- Tourism destination
- Sales tax generator (from out-of-town guests).
- Promote healthy lifestyles
- Job creation
- Improved quality of life
- Bike transportation system
- Lessened environmental impact

The study highlighted many examples of economic growth in other Midwestern regions where trails were maintained and promoted.
The enterprise zone is a state-authorized, locally designated geographical area that provides special incentives to encourage economic development, strengthen the business climate, and help create jobs. The Northwest Illinois Enterprise Zone was certified by the State of Illinois on March 1, 1990. The Northwest Illinois Enterprise Zone termination date has been renewed and extended to December 31, 2034.

The Northwest Illinois Enterprise Zone includes areas in:

- City of Freeport
- Rural Stephenson County
- Village of Lena
- Rural Jo Daviess County
- Village of Hanover
- City of East Dubuque

Business Interruption Grants

- 59 Businesses Received $1.6M

City of Freeport Res. & Comm. Investment

- 767 Permits Issued $10 Million

Stephenson Co. Res. & Comm. Investment

- 111 Permits Issued $30 Million

Freeport & Stephenson County Value:

- Art, Design & Culture
- Diversity in All Forms
- Hard Work and the Entrepreneurial Spirit
- Outdoor Experience
- Giving Back
- Commitment to Learning

The Greater Freeport Partnership is the place where organizations and people unite to advocate for the region, drive economic growth and champion a talented, workforce-ready community.