

FOCUS ON POTTSTOWN

Unlocking Pottstown's Potential

DIVERSITY-FOCUSED INVESTORS CONFERENCE A VIRTUAL SUCCESS

The upbeat, online Pottstown Investors Conference held April 16 showcased not only the resilience within the Western Montgomery County borough's shared business community, but also the tangible, rich opportunity that exists if entrepreneurs, investors, and residents embrace diversity as a driver for sustainable economic and nonprofit success.

About 150 registrants participated in the free, virtual event, hosted by Hobart's Run; Pottstown Area Industrial Development, Inc.; the Borough of Pottstown; and The Hill School. This was the fourth Pottstown Investors Conference. The 2020 event was cancelled due to the then-growing Covid pandemic. This year, organizers were eager to bring potential and existing investors back to the table to share very encouraging news and address the timely issue of social equity and its impact on Pottstown's business environment.

If you missed the conference but would like to view a video, contact Stephanie Trauner at stephanie@hobart-srunpottstown.org.

Don Chen

The keynote speaker, Don Chen, president and CEO of the New York City-based Surdna Foundation, emphasized that ensuring an equitable post-pandemic recovery is important not only because it is the just thing to do.

After the initial focus on surviving the pandemic, "older cities like Pottstown should reinvent themselves and the diversity of their economic drivers," Chen said, adding that towns which enrich their "social fabric" will differentiate themselves from other business environments.

Diversification requires strong, committed leadership from civic, business, and



educational stakeholders; people-centered support such as training; creative use and re-use of available physical spaces; and the smart use of public money and investor capital.

"Communities need to create welcoming spaces" for people of color, immigrants (who, statistics show, create *more* jobs), and

women entrepreneurs, Chen said. Growth sectors ripe for investment include businesses that allow employees to work remotely, the tech and science industries, and small scale "makerspaces" such as craftsmen working with textiles, wood, and other materials.

The Surdna Foundation's investments



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promote diversity and foster a more inclusive society that closes the wealth gap, as it believes such commitments “will lead to better returns and impact,” Chen said.

The social networks existing in towns like Pottstown, he observed, are strong. “People check in with other,” he said. “They realize ‘we all are in this together’ – and the community is worth saving and building upon.”

The key to attracting more businesses owned by black and brown people can be summed up in one word: Trust. Pottstown as a whole must build relationships with existing and potential businesspeople and “ascertain the needs of the community,” Chen said. Loans must be accessible to all potential investors. And larger, established businesses must support smaller businesses.

If communities do not work to include and embrace people of color, immigrant, and women-owned businesses, they are “missing out on unlocking the potential” for the entire community, Chen said.

Sulaiman Rahman

Sulaiman Rahman, the CEO of Philadelphia-based DiverseForce, a “human capital solutions firm,” addressed the challenges of preparing the next generation of black and brown leaders for their role in the business and nonprofit world. Rahman

was introduced by Mike Harris, chairman of the Hobart’s Run Board of Directors.

Research shows a troubling 86 to 95 percent of all nonprofit leaders are white, he noted, a statistic reflecting the real need to bring broader cultural perspectives and collaboration to leadership entities.

When leaders work in silos and fail to think of the collective impact embodied by diversity, they miss the chance to “build robust pipelines of diverse talent and to build aspirational capital,” Rahman said, noting DiverseForce led a training program that filled 120 board seats with such diverse talent over the past four years.

Like Chen, Rahman suggested Pottstown leaders look for ways to make the community as desirable as possible for *all* people to live and invest in. Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, has provided significant financial incentives to people so they will stay in their city and find ways to work remotely. Another worthwhile incentive might be for leaders to offset moving costs for talent to move here and make the town the place where they want to live, work, and play.

Entrepreneurs need to have ample access to technical support and training, as well as financial support. Crowdsourcing can be one way to raise money for investment in Pottstown by people of color, Rahman said.

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FOCUS ON POTTSTOWN

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Case Studies of Pottstown Resilience

The Conference featured two stories of pandemic resilience shared by Pottstown business owners Kristen Sirbak of Beverly's Pastry Shop and Zahmere Trott of Uptown Flavors Kitchen. In introducing Sirbak and Trott, Lee-Clark praised their innovation, grit, and commitment to our community. While they had not previously offered curbside pickup, both owners adapted and offered this service to keep their businesses afloat.

Trott was in constant communication with PAID about changing regulations and he built his network by reaching out to the Pottstown NAACP and other local political and business support groups.

He refused to raise his prices, he said, as he wanted to be sure his soul food would remain affordable. In fact, he sent hundreds of free lunches to children in the community as a way of helping Pottstown – and was pleasantly surprised to find that his customer base tripled following his act of kindness.

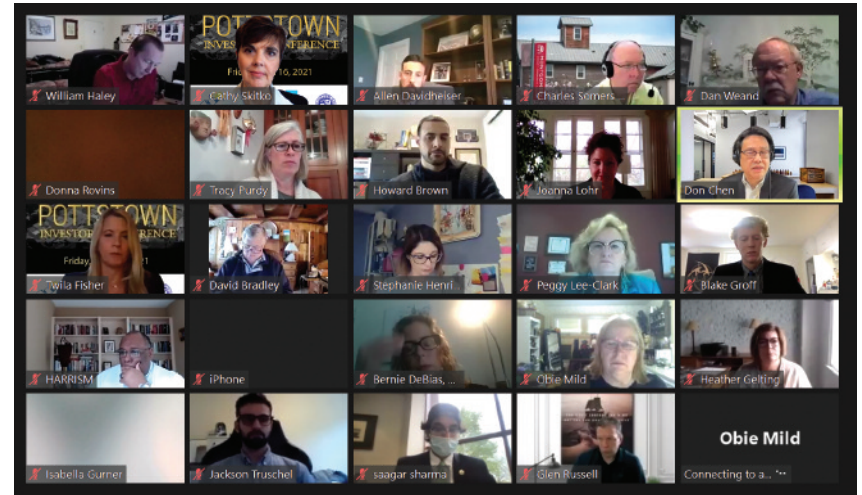
Despite her temporary shutdown, Sirbak kept her friendly face in front of customers by creating “how to” videos from her home kitchen and she consciously looked at “problems” as “solutions” in disguise. She was especially focused on surviving so she could bring her staff – “my girls,” she said with affection – back to work.

“I never got so close to my customers as I did throughout this [pandemic] experience,” she said. “Our community is strong. We love our community, and they love us back. The community is the reason I come in here every day.”

Hobart's Run

Twila Fisher, executive director of the Hobart's Run initiative, and Cathy Skitko, director of Hobart's Run communications and community relations, shared an update about recent developments.

Highlights included hosting a successful Borough-wide clean-up and providing tools for small neighborhood litter pick-ups; placement of 42 “Adopt-a-Trashcan” bins throughout the Borough and securing eight corporate bin sponsors; funding security cameras at the Ricketts Center; proceeding with Pa. DCED-funded safety enhancements on Beech Street; facilitating



Edgewood Cemetery cleanups and fundraisers; promoting Hobart's Run's Homeownership Incentive Program (HIP) and Façade Improvement Grants (FIG); ongoing Block Captain engagement; thriving monthly Community Leaders Breakfast networking sessions; and distribution of \$17,000 in Covid-relief grants to 10 businesses and 14 nonprofits since last March.

Twila announced the launch of \$1,500 Business Incentive Grants (BIG) for busi-

nesses that open in the 600 – 900 blocks of High Street as well as Hobart's Run's move into a new, more accessible office space at 856-A East High Street.

PAID, INC.

Peggy Lee-Clark, provided updates about several exciting projects, including a new Life Sciences Incubator, Y3, LLC, located on the third floor of 159 E. High Street; a bio-diesel, “green” fuel production facility, Pottstown Sustainability

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Chicken & Beef Soups	Campanelli To-Go Chicken & Beef Noodle Soups
Fruit Cups/Applesauce	Dole Fruit in Juice & Melts Applesauce
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Pop-Tarts	Kellogg's Pop-Tarts
Cereal (single serve)	Kellogg's Pop-Tarts
Non-refrigerated Milk	Henbury's, Horizon, Giant (8 oz. boxes with straw)
Variety Snack Packs	Garden of Eatin', On the Border, Mission
Fruit Snacks	Goldfish, Cheez-It, Animal Crackers, Crackers
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Energy Plant, to be located on Keystone Boulevard; and the restoration and renovation of the former Pottstown *Mercury* office building on Hanover Street into a boutique hotel and restaurant.

"Long-term investors are telling us that – even with Covid – they have never before seen such interest in Pottstown development," Lee-Clark emphasized. She cited a recent Philadelphia *Inquirer* article stating the average Pottstown home now sells within six days and featuring Pottstown apartments as offering "far more bang for the buck" than residences in other regional locations.

Investors know Pottstown offers a "really beautiful and walkable community," she said, adding, "We are hitting the [post-pandemic] reset button, and looking forward to a strong future."

The Borough of Pottstown

Justin Keller, Borough manager, began his update by declaring "the complexity of our town is changing for the better."

Contributing to Pottstown's strong investment climate are the hot Pottstown real estate market; substantiated movement toward re-establishment of rail transportation to and from Philadelphia;

ongoing Borough infrastructure upgrades and work to bring federal infrastructure improvement funding to our town; and the presence of four, full-time fire and emergency services companies as well as 47 highly trained police officers.

All these aspects "show we are a highly desirable place to be," Keller said.

Breakouts

Conference participants had the chance to engage in small virtual group discussions. In one "room," local investor Christa Costello said she has felt these conferences "have made a real difference in Pottstown investment," adding, "I really feel Pottstown is coming back."

Eileen Dautrich, president of the Tri-County Area Chamber of Commerce, said she immediately reached out to Rahman with hopes this Conference connection will help the Chamber's efforts to increase the number of minority-owned businesses.

While Pottstown struggled with a negative self-image for many years, the conferences led to much of that negativity disappearing, said Bill Haley, editor and publisher of *Route 422 Business Advisor*. "Events like these help get out the word about Pottstown, and this conference will help encourage diversity," he said.

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