

# 2025 PROGRESS CHENANGO

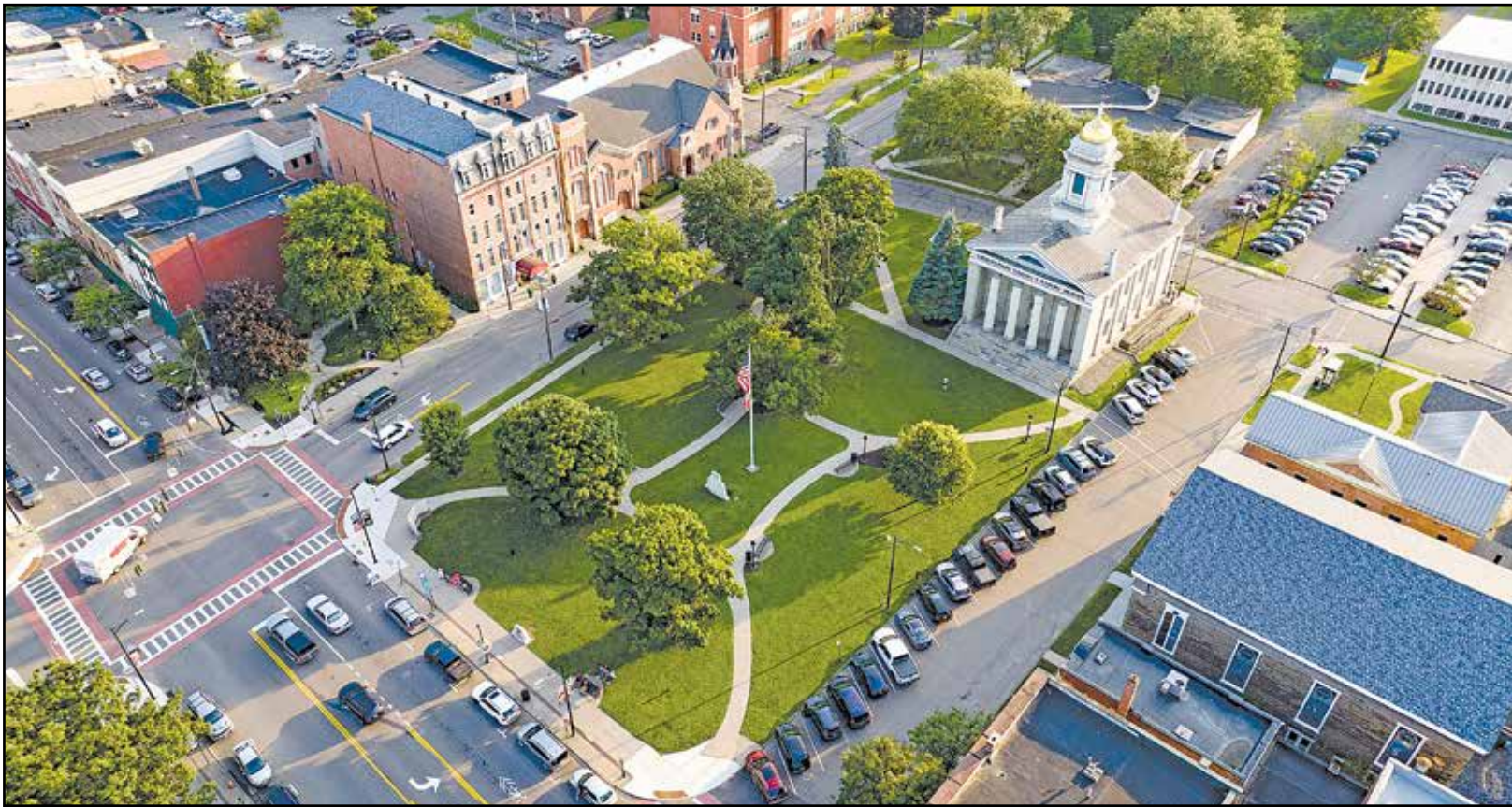
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Publication of The Evening Sun

## Commerce Chenango leads the way on community challenges

**TYLER MURPHY**  
EVENING SUN

NORWICH - In a region known for its rolling hills and tight-knit communities, Commerce Chenango has been quietly leading a transformative effort to redefine economic growth and community well-being. Throughout 2024, the organization has been at the forefront of initiatives aimed at revitalizing Chenango County by addressing key challenges such as workforce development, housing shortages, and regional collaboration. As the year draws to a close, the impact of these efforts is becoming increasingly clear, with new programs, partnerships, and a sense of momentum shaping the county's future.



Commerce Chenango's goal is to make Chenango County a better place to live, work, and visit. Visit [www.commercechenango.com](http://www.commercechenango.com) for more information. (Photo from Commerce Chenango)

President and CEO Sal Testoni, who has been the driving force behind many of these changes, describes Commerce Chenango's mission in straightforward terms: "We wake up every day thinking about how to make Chenango County a better place to live, work, and visit. That's our goal, and every decision we make is guided by that purpose."

The challenges are undeniable. Like many rural areas, Chenango County faces economic and demographic pressures, with businesses struggling to fill open positions, a shortage of affordable housing, and a need for strategic investments in infrastructure and community development. Yet, as Testoni and his team

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## The Impact Project saves many county homes while facing challenges

**KELLI MILLER**  
EVENING SUN

CHENANGO COUNTY -- The Impact Project is a non profit organization located in Greene NY, that provides major home repairs for low income and middle income families.

The Impact Project has two primary target populations. One is families below the Federal Poverty Guidelines, who can qualify for no-cost repairs and updates. And the second target population is families over the federal poverty level, that qualify for the NY State HEAP program can potentially qualify for the Impact Project Loan Program.

Once approved, the loan

financing would be through Sidney Federal Credit Union with terms up to \$15,000 at .5 percent interest rate, over 5 years.

"This enables people with little resources to make something obtainable," he said, "The financial arrangement behind the scenes is different in every case," said Impact Project Executive Director James Willard III.

"We're getting calls from doctors offices with social workers and social workers in hospitals looking for help with repairs for clients and calls from agencies that no longer have funding, the calls are coming in from all sides," said Willard.

"Our goal is to help people fix there homes that can't do

so for themselves, for whatever reasons, and now, it seems this task is sitting entirely on the back of our organization," he added.

Willard said through the years they have built relationships and arrangements with about 400 contractors including electricians, masons, roofers, contractors, and more. He said it's a huge component for the completion of a job.

"Skilled contractors are always at the projects along with volunteers, but there must be skilled labor to get the job done," he added.

Major 2024 developments "We had several different milestones in 2024," said

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It was a double bubble day for Pat Rivenburg of Norwich when he received a handicap ramp and hot water tank plus plumbing repairs for the Impact Projects 186th and 18th projects. Support from Dave and Dean Westervelt and the Area Agency on Aging Chenango County was greatly appreciated. (Submitted photo)

**THE EVENING  
SUN**

**TYLER MURPHY**  
EVENING SUN

## Building a Brighter Chenango County

In Chenango County, the future is being built day by day, through the hard work of community businesses and organizations.

Across Norwich, Sherburne, Greene, Oxford, Bainbridge, New Berlin, the Otselic Valley, and beyond, communities are coming together to prepare for a brighter tomorrow. The choices we make now, the plans we implement, and the

collaborations we foster are laying the groundwork for generations to come.

The Evening Sun has proudly chronicled these moments of growth and transformation through its annual Progress Chenango series. For decades, this special publication has provided a comprehensive look at how our county is evolving. It's not just a retrospective of accomplishments but

a forward-thinking exploration of what's next for our region.

This year's edition, "Progress Chenango: A Brighter Tomorrow," will highlight the strides made in infrastructure, workforce development, housing, and public services. These efforts are all aimed at improving the quality of life for every resident.

The Progress Chenango

series represents The Evening Sun's commitment to the community, going beyond daily reporting to foster understanding and connection with residents. It serves to highlight local progress, community connections, factors driving economic growth, and local history.

By showcasing the

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# Commerce Chenango leads the way on community challenges -

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emphasize, these challenges also represent opportunities for growth and innovation.

## Workforce Development: A Foundation for Growth

At the heart of Commerce Chenango's 2024 efforts is a focus on workforce development. With over 300 job openings in the county, the need for skilled workers has never been more pressing. Employers across industries, from manufacturing to customer service, report difficulty in finding candidates with the right qualifications. Recognizing this, Commerce Chenango has prioritized creating a pipeline of talent that meets the needs of local businesses.

A cornerstone of this effort is the planned Workforce Development initiative, that is being launched in 2025. The program will offer customized training programs tailored to the specific needs of local employers, covering areas such as technical skills, workplace communication, and essential employment behaviors like punctuality and professionalism. Testoni describes the initiative as a collaborative effort. "We're working directly with employers to design programs that will prepare residents for the jobs that are available right here in our community," he said.

While the center represents a long-term investment, 2024 has already seen progress in



Commerce Chenango President and CEO Sal Testoni recognized Director of the Chenango County Historical Society Jessica Moquin for her contribution to the organization at the Chamber Member appreciation event in September. (Photo by Tyler Murphy)

workforce-related initiatives. Commerce Chenango has partnered with local schools and organizations to introduce career readiness programs, giving students and job seekers the tools they need to succeed in a competitive market. These efforts are designed not only to fill current job openings but also to position the county as a hub for skilled labor in the years ahead.

During the year, Commerce Chenango also focused on essential employment skills through programs that teach participants, many of them local students, how to dress professionally, write emails effectively, and meet work-

place expectations. These skills may seem basic but are foundational for building a reliable and capable workforce said Testoni. "It's not just about technical skills. It's about preparing people for success in every aspect of their job," Testoni emphasized.

The organization also recognizes that workforce development extends beyond training just individuals. Retaining existing businesses is also critical. Testoni explained, "Our focus is to ensure that local businesses have the skilled workforce they need to thrive. If we can fill those 300 job openings, that's 300 lives changed and

300 steps toward a stronger local economy."

## Tackling the Housing Crisis

Workforce development is only part of the equation. Commerce Chenango has also taken aim at another critical issue: the shortage of affordable housing. As Testoni said, housing availability is directly tied to economic growth. "If we want to attract and retain a skilled workforce, we need to ensure they have places to live," he said.

Chenango County's housing challenges are multifaceted. Many properties remain vacant, either due

to disrepair or other barriers to occupancy. To address this, Commerce Chenango has drawn inspiration from successful programs in other regions. For example, a vacant dwelling registration initiative in Watertown has shown promise in encouraging property owners to either rehabilitate or sell underutilized homes. While such an approach may not be a perfect fit for Chenango County, it highlights the kind of creative thinking that Testoni and his team are exploring.

Commerce Chenango has also been exploring mixed-use housing solutions, particularly for downtown areas, as a way to boost economic

activity and provide more living options. Efforts to secure grants for housing revitalization projects have been a key focus in 2024. Through partnerships with local developers and state funding opportunities, the organization is working to bring more properties back into circulation, creating affordable options for workers and families. Testoni is optimistic about the potential impact. "These efforts will take time, but they're essential if we want to build a sustainable future for our community," he said.

Additionally, the organization is examining best practices from other communities to address long-standing issues. For instance, vacant homes on tax rolls pose significant challenges but could be revitalized through incentives and collaboration with private developers. Testoni and his team have spent much of the year analyzing local data and engaging with stakeholders to develop tailored solutions.

## Celebrating Achievements

One of the highlights of 2024 was the recognition of Unison as Manufacturer of the Year. The aerospace company, which has been a major employer for years, was honored for its innovation and commitment to Chenango County. "Unison's success is a testament to the strength of our local workforce and the potential that exists here,"

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# Commerce Chenango leads the way on community challenges -

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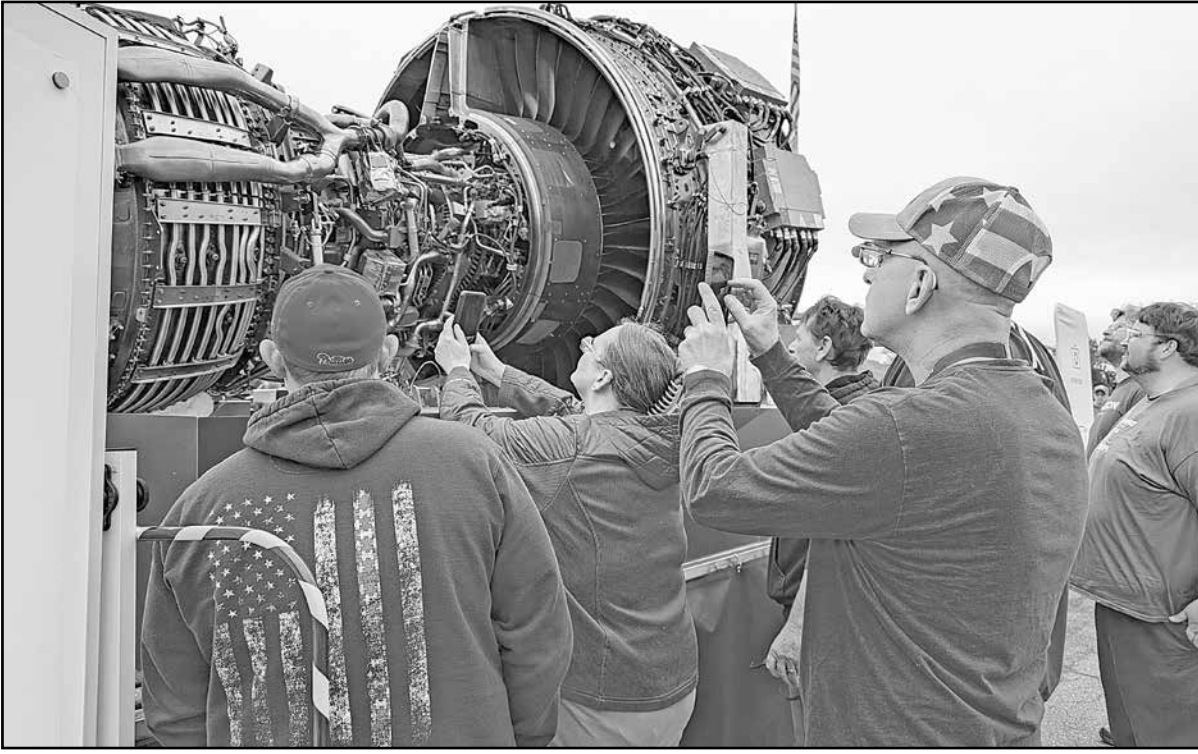
Testoni said. The award serves as a reminder of the critical role that manufacturing plays in the region and the importance of supporting businesses that invest in the community.

Commerce Chenango's efforts to celebrate local achievements also played a key role in promoting events and initiatives that showcase the county's assets. Festivals like the Blues Festival weekend attract thousands of visitors, yet Testoni believes these events hold untapped potential. "We need to think about how to turn these events into something that leaves a lasting economic impact," he said. By developing a broader visitor economy strategy, Commerce Chenango aims to capitalize on such opportunities, ensuring that visitors stay longer and spend more during their trips.

One idea discussed throughout the year has been creating a series of interconnected events that highlight the region's culture and resources. Testoni pointed to Cooperstown as an example, where a singular attraction—the Baseball Hall of Fame—has been expanded into a brand that draws visitors for multiple activities. "What can we do here to create that kind of residual impact? That's what we're working toward," he said.

### Enhancing Safety and Security

Beyond economic initiatives, Commerce Chenango has made significant strides in improving public safety through the Chenango Threat Assessment Management Team. The team, which includes representatives from law enforcement, schools, and local organizations, focuses on identifying and addressing behaviors that could lead to violence. In 2024, the group provided support to more than 30 individuals, helping to defuse potentially dangerous situations before they escalated.



Unison was recognized by Commerce Chenango as the 2024 Manufacturer of the Year. Employees view a LEAP engine on display for at Unison. (Photo from Unison)



Attendees at the inaugural Chenango Women's Leadership Conference last year. The 2nd annual conference will be held on Tuesday, March 25 at the Canasawacta Country Club. (Photo from Commerce Chenango)

Testoni views this work as integral to the county's overall well-being. "A thriving community is a safe community," he said. "By taking a proactive approach to public safety, we're creating an environment where residents and businesses can flourish."

The program has drawn praise from state and regional leaders, who see it as a model for other communities. For Commerce Chenango, the success of the the group underscores the importance of collaboration in addressing complex challenges.

A particularly innovative aspect of the tema has been its focus on preemptive education and training. Local businesses have been engaged in active shooter drills, behavioral assessment workshops, and crisis management plan-

ning. These initiatives aim to equip employers with the tools needed to recognize early warning signs and respond effectively.

### Building Regional Partnerships

Recognizing that Chenango County's success is tied to its neighbors, Commerce Chenango has strengthened its regional partnerships in 2024. Collaborations with organizations such as Southern Tier 8 and the Industrial Development Agency have created opportunities in areas like clean technology, workforce training, and tourism development.

One example of this regional approach is the county's participation in initiatives connected to the

Micron semiconductor plant in Onondaga County. While the plant is located outside Chenango County, its ripple effects are expected to create new opportunities for businesses and workers throughout the region. By positioning itself as a partner in these

broader efforts, Commerce Chenango is ensuring that the county benefits from these developments.

Testoni believes that regional collaboration is essential for long-term success. "We're stronger when we work together," he said. "By aligning our efforts with those of our neighbors, we can achieve more than we ever could on our own."

Regional partnerships have also extended to cultural and environmental initiatives. Commerce Chenango has worked with neighboring counties to promote cross-county tourism packages, highlighting unique attractions in each area. Additionally, clean energy projects and infrastructure upgrades have been a focus, with the organization advocating for investments that benefit multiple communities.

### Looking Ahead in 2025

As Commerce Chenango prepares for the coming year, its leaders are focused on building on the progress made in 2024. Key priorities include launching the Workforce Development Center, expanding housing initiatives, and implementing a visitor economy framework designed to attract long-term investments in tourism.

Testoni acknowledges that challenges remain but is confident in the organization's ability to navigate them. "If 2024 has taught us anything, it's that persistence and collaboration pay off," he said. "We've laid the foundation

for success, and now it's time to build on it."

The organization's efforts are supported by a dedicated team, which was fully staffed for the first time in more than a year. Testoni credits the team's commitment and local roots for much of Commerce Chenango's success. "Our staff truly cares about this community," he said. "That passion drives everything we do."

As the year ends, there is a palpable sense of optimism about what lies ahead for Chenango County. Through its innovative programs and partnerships, Commerce Chenango is not just addressing the challenges of today but also laying the groundwork for a brighter, more prosperous future. For Testoni and his team, the mission remains clear: to create a county where residents and businesses alike can thrive.

With a clear vision and a growing base of support, Commerce Chenango continues to be a driving force for progress. The organization's work in 2024 has demonstrated that even in the face of challenges, strategic planning, community engagement, and regional collaboration can pave the way for lasting change. As the county moves into 2025, the focus remains on building a future that reflects the resilience and aspirations of its people.

## Building a Brighter Chenango County -

# THE EVENING SUN

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accomplishments of local businesses and organizations, Progress Chenango celebrates the creativity and resilience of our neighbors while inspiring others to join in the work of building a better future.

The heart of Progress Chenango is the voices of the people driving change—business owners, community leaders, educators, first responders, and everyday citizens who are making a difference. This series brings their stories to life, showcasing the vision, determination,

and realities that define our hometowns.

This year's edition reviews ways Chenango County is positioning itself for success. From ambitious infrastructure projects to innovative workforce training programs, from housing solutions to expanded public services, the stories in Progress Chenango are a reflection of what's possible when a community works together.

As we look ahead to 2025 and beyond, it's clear that challenges remain, but so do opportunities. Progress Chenango serves as both a celebration of

what we've achieved and a call to action for the work still to be done. It reminds us that the future isn't something that happens to us; it's something we create.

Let's celebrate the progress we've made, learn from the stories of those who are leading the way, and look forward to the possibilities that await. For more information, visit [evesun.com](http://evesun.com), where past editions of Progress Chenango are available.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Together, we're building a brighter Chenango County.

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## The Impact Project saves many county homes while facing challenges -

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Willard. "We had our 20th anniversary in 2024 and completed our 200th project in early spring and we also completed 40 projects in one year, it was a record breaking year."

"In the last three years we have completed 94 construction projects and the total to date is 235 projects," he added.

The organization was clipping off about a project a month and in the last three years and went from roughly 145 to 235 in three years.

He said one of the largest projects was a three story home roof repair in Sidney. The original roof was from 1901 and had two layers of shingles and then the original roof of cedar shakes still attached.

"We had to strip those shakes and it took us about two weeks to finish that job to save that home," Willard said. "1st Choice Roofing with Myra Luna worked on this project with us and God Bless them."

### Challenges of 2024 and focus on 2025

"Making sure we can help as many people as we can," he said. "Completing those 40 projects was really pushing the lid on the jar. It's just us and two people and a volunteer board.

"It's right in front of our faces every day and people cannot afford to fix their homes, for whatever reason it may be and the nail in the coffin is the home is no longer safe and affordable to live in," Willard said.

He noted there are over 6100 vacant homes in this county, which is almost twice the national average.

Material costs are extremely high and to repair a home has increased between 50 to 75% over the four years since COVID.

"If you couldn't afford to fix your house then, how can a homeowner afford it now?" Willard asked.

"We have a problem and now we need a miracle," he said.

The Impact Project is getting anywhere between five to ten calls a day for help and normally this time of year it's dead but because nobody else is helping repair community homes, their phone is 'ring-



The Impact Project announced their 200th project over 20 years of service and celebrated the event by replacing a small front porch and stairs at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fink in Norwich, NY. (Photo by Kelli Miller)

ing off the hook'.

He thanks all who supported homeowner projects in 2024 and said he is extremely grateful for those who support their mission to help families stay safe in their homes.

"None of this would be possible without you," said Willard.

### 2024 Positive Outcome

Willard noted a project in Coventry for Mary Strong had one of the best outcomes because the handicap ramp that was built to help her and her adult son, who has Multiple Sclerosis, allowed Mary to finally stop carrying her son up the stairs to their home and he now can walk himself up the ramp, providing both freedom and quality of life.

He said there are so many stories of replaced roofs, hot water heaters and ramps that changed the way people live.

"I can't even tell you how many tears of joy we shed behind the scenes," Willard said. "It's just so hard."

### Grants and awards

"In 2024, funding was pretty standard but the thing that changed a lot was with a couple construction companies that came alongside us and understood what we're doing," Willard said. "They are willing to sacrifice profitability from the business end and help support community projects."

He said they replaced a lot of hot water heaters and furnaces in 2024 and thanks to Blue Ox and its partnerships, that stretched their dollars and helped more people.

"I would say that's pretty much the reason we were able to surpass 2023 goals because we have found some partners that are willing to go to work and help people, it's not all about business, it's about people," he added.

BlueOx Energy Products, Curtis Lumber, Norwich Tractor have offered tremendous support for the projects. Norwich Tractor helped on many handicap projects,

donating an excavator and one of their employees for the day to help dig all the excavation for free.

Contractors in South Otselic, Neals 2 Build and Diehl Handyman Services also support the project needs and do not ask much. He mentioned Rose Family Construction has built ramps through the years, Two brothers run the construction company and have helped for many times.

This is what really pushes the Impact Project forward is its partnerships.

"It's about relationships," he added

### Looking back

Willard said if he were to go back a year, he would advise himself to take one house at a time.

"I have to remind myself of that because I get caught up in the numbers, but it's really about helping people, one house at a time."

### Major Plans for 2025- challenges and opportunities

One of our major challenges occurred about three weeks ago when Willard got a call from one of the directors from another agency.

He said the other agency is no longer involved with home repairs as they lost their funding and called Willard to let him know they were out of the business.

He said the call went like this, "Jim, you know that sitcom with Tim Allen, 'Last Man Standing', and I answered him yeah, I've watched it a zillion times and he replied, You're it, you are the last organization within two counties that is full time devoted to helping homeowners."

"And that brought me no joy at all," Willard said. "There is plenty of work to be done to help people and that call literally came to me four days before Christmas."

"We have had 31 agencies in the Southern Tier refer homes to us because there is nobody else doing this," he stated

Willard said they can't keep up with the needs of all applications received and there will be a lot more no's than yes's.

"That's the sad part and the heart of all of the people in this organization is we want to help everybody but there is no way, no way we can carry this load," he added.

"We need help, at the end of the day, what this issue needs is to have resources and commitment put into it," Willard said. "I don't mean that from a standpoint of just money, money is just part of it, people need to be willing to commit to the problem."

"The impact Project is the only organization in Chenango County that is operating full time helping homeowners with home repairs.

Our goals are facing the reality of the issue of being able to help people fix their homes that can't do so, it sits almost entirely on the back of this organization.

"We're taking it one day at a time," Willard said.

Making sure we can help as many people as we can. Completing those 40 projects was really pushing the lid on the jar. It's just us and two

people and a volunteer board and I don't know

It's right in front of our faces every day and people cannot afford to fix their homes, for whatever reason it may be and the nail in the coffin is the home is no longer safe and affordable to live in. We have over 6100 vacant homes in this county, which is almost twice the national average.

The great people of this county continue to fight and they do what they can do to stay in their home because nobody really wants to leave their home but it's becoming quite overwhelming to reach out to everyone of our county homeowners and support them

We feel like we're on an island here," he added.

Willard said he has had conversations with officials yet he is left perplexed as nothing came from it.

"I believe we are at a tipping point and he isn't sure which way it is tipping," he said.

He feels as if the government is a reactive entity, it is not proactive and said he believes in order to get something done, there must be an accident at the intersection for the attention and finger pointing, so the traffic light finally goes in.

Willard wonders how long it will take the centers of influence to finally wake up to how many people are leaving before they realize Chenango County is in trouble.

He considers they know the issues but said until it affects their bottom line, then finally people will wake up.

"This is the cancer that's eating this county up," he added.

"We lose about a thousand homeowners every ten years. Over COVID we saw that increase about 30% and it's evident," he continued. "I don't know what it's going to take because the average homeowner spends about 60% of their annual income on their home and that money is part of the commerce that keeps the financial engine of this county alive."

"You can't keep losing people when they pack up and leave their homes, it's just not sustainable," he said. Willard said surround-

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# Chenango Story



Above: US Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer visited Unison's Norwich facility on September 5 to celebrate GE Aerospace's \$3.4 million investment in the plant. Left: US Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer stands with employees of Unison and GE Aerospace after a tour of the Norwich facility. (Photos by Sarah Genter)

## Unison named 2024 Manufacturer of the Year

**SARAH GENTER**  
EVENING SUN

**NORWICH** – On September 25, Unison, a GE Aerospace company, was recognized as Chenango County's Manufacturer of the Year by Commerce Chenango.

The award recognized Unison's significant contributions to the local community and ongoing commitment to manufacturing excellence.

"We are deeply honored to receive the 2024 Commerce Chenango Manufacturer of the Year award," said Shannon Slack, Site Leader at Unison. "This recognition is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our entire team. We are committed to continuing our tradition of excel-

lence and contributing to the prosperity of Chenango County."

In a demonstration of its ongoing commitment to the Norwich community, GE Aerospace recently invested \$3.4 million into the Unison site.

On September 5 US Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer visited Unison in Norwich to celebrate the \$3.4 million-plus investment by GE Aerospace.

The investment will modernize the plant, purchase inspection tools and additional tooling for increased capacity, invest in new machines for production of key components in advanced military engines, replace equipment, and make major upgrades to the Norwich plant that will improve the shop layout

and key building systems.

"I'm proud to say that GE Aerospace this year will be investing over \$3.4 million in this Norwich facility to help make major upgrades to keep it on the cutting edge and ready for the future," said Schumer.

"The critical \$3.4 million expands its capacity at this site, meaning the hardworking folks of GE Aerospace in the Norwich facility will be able to produce more products, and as the aviation market grows, this site is ready to meet the demand. As we all know, more work, what does that mean? More jobs. It's already happening right here."

Employees at the Norwich facility produce electrical and mechanical systems, advanced gas turbine components, starter systems, and various other

product lines and services. The plant conducts processing including assembly, machining, welding, brazing, plating, soldering, and much more to produce approximately one million parts per year, serving over 140 global customers.

Across New York State, GE Aerospace employs approximately 1,640 people at two manufacturing sites and two additional facilities, and has more than 360 in-state suppliers, to provide electrical and power, hypersonics, manufacturing, research and development, and testing to both commercial and military customers.

GE Aerospace Chief Transformation Officer Phil Wickler thanked the senator and community, "On behalf of everyone at GE Aerospace, we want

to thank you for spending time with us today, not only to meet our workforce, but to see the amazing products that we're creating here in Norwich. We believe it's vital to continue to invest in the future of US manufacturing, and that's why GE Aerospace has committed \$550 million of investment in our manufacturing sites and facilities in the US in 2024. This includes the \$3.4 million investment right here in New York State."

GE Aerospace employs approximately 52,000 employees globally, with 12,000 engineering jobs and 29,000 manufacturing jobs. The Norwich facility has a 75-year history with advancements in air and space travel, including producing the first electronic ignition system used in the 1963 Centaur Space

Vehicle, and multiple products in the 1969 Apollo 11 launch and moon landing being manufactured in the Norwich facility.

Unison employs more than 2,000 people across five major manufacturing locations as well as engineering centers and supporting sites worldwide.

In a few years, the Norwich facility has gone from producing a few space products to 50-60 space products. They have also made workforce improvements by creating a specialized welding program at DCMO BOCES that primes students for a position at GE Unison.

*(Sophia Root also contributed to this article)*

## The Impact Project saves many county homes while facing challenges -

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ing counties have the same challenges, yet their numbers are not as bad as Chenango County, as a percentage.

"I'm not saying that's good, but they don't have over 25% of their homes vacant," he said. "The National average is 13.96% and we have over 25% vacant."

Willard noted the Benefits and challenges of being in Chenango County are hand in hand. He said there is plenty of work to do and it's a compliment because so many people send homeowners their way.

### Hiring and Retaining employees

Willard explained the Impact project has limited resources being a non-profit. "We have a great team," Willard said. "Along the way, it had to be the right person that had to understand the limited resources."

"Being a non-profit, we don't offer a dental plan or great health insurance or 401 K."

### Additional Information

The main office is at 4 Clinton Street in Greene, NY and operation hours are 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The Impact Project currently have a staff of two and six volunteers on the board.

Willard explained the board makes the decisions for the organization and also decides upon who the Impact Project can and cannot help.

Applications are reviewed with a detailed vetting process and homeowner projects are reviewed because they are a small organization and must make sure they have the money to do this project.

Willard noted there are a lot of people in need that don't have the money or they can't find a contractor to help them out and sometimes The Impact Project can't find volunteers, so the board lines it all up to make projects happen.

For more information, visit the website at [theimpactprojectgreene.org](http://theimpactprojectgreene.org) or visit their Facebook page at The Impact Project.



The Impact Project completed their 230th project at the home of Bonnie Evans in Sherburne, NY. A new roof was replaced with the support from 1st Choice Roofers and Renovations, Alpine Metal Roofing and Curtis Lumber Company. (Submitted photo)

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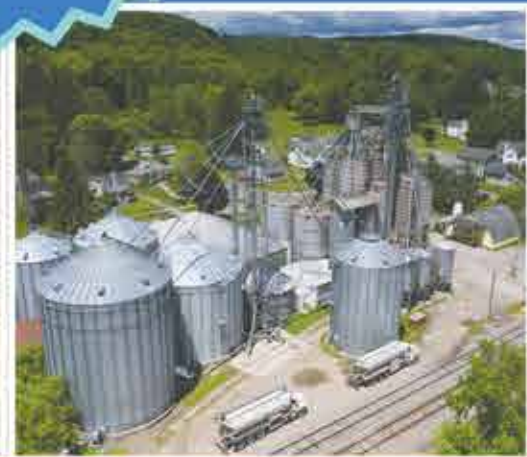
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