

## OUR VIEW

# A night to celebrate

This past week's annual meeting for the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce was both a well-earned pat on the back for accomplishments and a sober recognition of a major challenge facing the area.

Such events often struggle to keep from being too self-congratulatory, stroking egos with little regard to whether the claimed accomplishments are of genuine value. That wasn't a problem Wednesday night. Officials, including David Minor, the chamber's president and CEO, smartly focused on the people who make the chamber run and the initiatives they've seen through over the past couple years.

Of particular note was the recognition of Eau Claire Police Chief Matt Rokus as the public employee of the year. Rokus' efforts to move the department ahead on a number of fronts, particularly in terms of finding innovative outreach and assistance opportunities, stand out. We've previously covered the department's attempts to help the community's homeless. Police encounters with people who don't have a permanent residence are far more often focused on confrontation than aid, and Rokus deserves the praise he received for his efforts to help change his department's basic thinking about the issue and the people involved.

Minor didn't shy away from the elephant in the room. The closure of two HSHS hospitals and the Prevea clinics in the region are a clear challenge. If those closures proceed as planned, the Chippewa Valley is looking at the loss of a significant number of jobs — and good paying jobs at that.

Beyond the people the closures mean large facilities will be empty. It's one thing to repurpose a small clinic or even a small-town hospital. It's another to figure out what to do with facilities the size of the HSHS hospitals in Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls.

The chamber's efforts may not be determinative. If the chamber could simply wave a wand or convene a committee and solve everything it probably already would have done so. But there's little question the chamber has a role to play, particularly in working its network of contacts and bringing people together to work toward new options. Minor said those efforts are already well underway, and we wish the chamber luck with the work.

Chambers of commerce are nothing new in the U.S. They're nothing new in the world for that matter — the first formed in Marseille, France, in the late 16th century. The oldest one in the U.S. is a solid 170 years younger.

Effective chambers? That's another question. Most chambers seem to be driven by inertia, a vision that perpetuates rather than innovates. The combination of capability and effort needed to make a chamber of commerce a genuine economic engine for development is considerably less common.

The Chippewa Valley has that combination, though. The successes Eau Claire has seen in the past couple decades aren't the sole result of the chamber's efforts, but there can be little question the chamber has played an important role in making connections, supporting new ideas and building momentum.

Wednesday's celebration was well-earned. The chamber has a fair amount to celebrate and those who have guided it to the position it holds today deserved their moments in the spotlight. Keeping that celebration from becoming self-satisfaction, with an unflinching acknowledgement of looming challenges on full display, speaks well to the chamber's ability to lead the Chippewa Valley's business community in the coming years.