

Rachel Johnson ([00:06](#)):

Welcome to co-op energy talk. I'm Rachel Johnson

Rachel Johnson ([00:09](#)):

Manager here at Cherryland electric cooperative. And I had the opportunity recently to sit down with Warren call Warren is the CEO of traverse connect. And for those of you who aren't familiar with it, Traverse connect is the economic development organization that serves the grand traverse region. And while traverse connect has been around for a while over the course of the last 18 months or so, they merged the Trevor city chamber into traverse connect to form the Edo and sorry for all the cool kids out there called Edo is our economic development organization. Anyway, traverse connect supports area businesses through business attraction and retention services, talent development efforts, government advocacy, and the things that we traditionally associate with chambers and more. And, uh, they also support other local organizations in areas like entrepreneurship, innovation and community development. So basically they're, they're all things economic development in our region and making sure it's coordinated and that we're growing in ways that are healthy and sustainable.

Rachel Johnson ([01:01](#)):

And, um, basically every region should have one. So in our conversation, which you'll hear soon, we talked about everything from the biggest challenges, our local businesses face during the shutdown due to COVID, to what opportunities we have as a region as we turn our focus to longterm economic recovery. But before we get to the interview, I want to take a moment to announce an exciting new partnership and opportunity for businesses served by Cherryland. Cherryland serves a little over 2,500 businesses, and most of them are small businesses, they're mom and pops, right? Uh, you know, a handful of employees, um, everything from barbershops to ice cream shops and traverse connects partner organization venture North, which is a lending organization recently launched a grant program called the regional resiliency fund. The regional resiliency fund basically provides micro grants. So grants that are \$5,000 or less to local businesses to help them recover as they're recovering from the academic shutdown and also help them retool to meet some of the different requirements with social distancing and PPE, and basically just build up their resiliency.

Rachel Johnson ([02:08](#)):

So these \$5,000 micro-grants are help to help our local business community build resiliency. Uh, it's specifically designed to support businesses with nine full time equivalent employees or less. So basically it's specifically designed to support cherrylands and bread and butter, those small rural businesses. And I'm very excited to announce that Cherryland is making a \$50,000 donation to the fund. Uh, there are a lot of reasons we did this. Most of them are tied to the fact that these are, you know, like I said, the bulk of the businesses we serve and we know that it's important that we help them to, um, to survive these changes and learn how to thrive in a new environment. But in addition, cherryland was able to kind of in the, in the early stages of the covert crisis was able to access federal stimulus dollars that we, you know, the helped us with cashflow and keeping our employees on payroll during kind the worst of it.

Rachel Johnson ([03:00](#)):

And we recognize that while our business has started to stabilize many others haven't. And so we view this \$50,000 donation to the regional resiliency fund is our way of paying that forward and helping our community and helping our local businesses. So if you own a small business in our region and are listening to this podcast, please head over to Travis connect or venture North's website and check out

the regional resiliency fund. Now I'm onto the interview, the task at hand. So please listen in as Warren and I discuss all things, local business and local economy. I, uh, I'd love to say that at the end of it all, you'll have all the answers. I'm not sure that's the case, but I will tell you that I left the interview with a just tremendous degree of confidence that we have a trusted resource in Travis connect and that they are working hard to help shepherd our local economy as we, whether COVID and pivot where necessary. And I think ultimately position the grand traverse region to be a premier place to start own and grow a business. So without further ado here is Warren. So Warren, to kick us off, I've just kind of thinking, I don't want to spend a ton of time looking back at what happened during the covert crisis, but I do want you to just take a moment to talk about kind of what was Trevor's Connect's primary focus during the shutdown and what kind of stuff were you guys working on?

Warren Call ([04:10](#)):

Yeah, thanks Rachel. And appreciate the opportunity to hear, um, obviously tremors connect, um, maintained our focus, which is, which has always clearly been on promoting family sustaining careers. Obviously the only way to do that amidst the crisis is to preserve as many of those jobs as possible. So what we did is we pivoted our activities and our outreach efforts. We partnered with a number of community organizations across grand Travers County in the public sector, private sector, law enforcement, medical community in the joint operation center, in the emergency operation center. Those were efforts that were organized around both communicating the, um, communicating out to the community, what the joint response was to the initial crisis, as well as an emergency operation center planning for how do you deal with the logistics? How do you deal with the planning that needs to be involved? How do you deal with eventually planning for the recovery?

Warren Call ([05:10](#)):

We also partnered with the MIDC and networks Northwest to develop funding resources with a micro grant program and a micro loan program through them, EDC, to help businesses, whether the initial storm there was, um, there was some funding they were able to secure. We also provided a lot of resources on other funding programs, obviously the PPP and other, the other details that were out there. So really it was a communications effort and that came in the form of our newsletters, our webinars, some industry specific forums, and then, um, obviously, you know, support systems across the board to help businesses, weather the storm.

Rachel Johnson ([05:53](#)):

So one of the things that I really liked that you guys did is that you didn't your support

Rachel Johnson ([05:58](#)):

Services to just, uh, businesses that invest in traverse connect. Instead, you made it available to all of the businesses in the community. And I know a lot of there was just so much information out there and the rules were constantly changing and the available funding sources were constantly changing and having a trusted resource to go do all that work so that we didn't have to. So we could just focus on our business was really, really helpful. And I suspect a lot of businesses, um, benefited from your willingness to share those resources, regardless of whether they were right.

Warren Call ([06:26](#)):

Yeah. Again, and our focus was on communication. So we were trying to provide as much helpful communication out to the world and that involved our investor companies, but companies, whether

they invest in us or not across Northern Michigan, also public agencies and other chambers of commerce and economic development organizations, we try to provide a resource for any organization that needed help in the crisis. We also wanted it to be a two way communication. So we did a lot of surveying of businesses and so we could get their feedback, how we could better help them. How could we report back to public entities, what the business community needed. We tried to make it a, both a, a two way communications effort.

Rachel Johnson (07:15):

So that's actually another thing I was hoping we could talk a little bit about what, what were you hearing from local businesses during that time? What were their primary concerns and what kind of just, what were you hearing, I guess? Yeah.

Warren Call (07:26):

Early on, certainly, um, obviously there was a lot of confusion, right? Just, just general confusion on what are the, um, what are the trusted resources? Where can we go for factual information? But a lot of it revolved around needing clarity on the new rules and guidelines. You know, there was over a hundred executive orders, businesses, and other organizations, nonprofits, et cetera, really needed clarity on the rules and the new guidelines. So we tried to do was take all the things coming out of Lansing and out of, uh, you know, the federal government and distill it into a clear, actionable guidelines that companies and others could follow. Obviously, they also had a lot of issues as, as every business did with liquidity and cashflow. Uh, we spent a lot of time getting them connected with the sources of liquidity, the lenders, the federal and state programs, helping them, uh, get educated and understand the various options in those programs, which one fit best for them and how they can apply for it and what resources they needed, where they could get more help.

Rachel Johnson (08:39):

Yeah. And it's interesting because I think, um, when you start talking about accessing some of those, whether they were state or federal dollars one to your point, it was very confusing to a lot of businesses. And I think overwhelming, it's interesting. I was, um, I got my haircut this weekend. Thank goodness salons are open. What best thing governor Whitmer ever for me. Uh, but, uh, when I was talking to my stylist who owns the salon and I was asking her if she'd taken advantage of any of these programs. And she said, you know, I looked at them, but they were so confusing. I was terrified. I was afraid that I was going to get myself into either alone that I didn't understand, and it would have consequences later. And I think a lot of businesses, um, felt that way, especially with access to, um, uh, different stimulus dollars in particular.

Rachel Johnson (09:20):

And I, and I think we're still seeing that a little bit. One of the programs that, um, trailer is very interested in now as an, as an investor is the regional resiliency fund. And when Laura and I were talking about the fund, she was telling me that something like 40 over 40% of the current applicants have not accessed any federal or state stimulus dollars. So there's still a lot of businesses in our community that are, um, kind of still trying to figure out what resources are available in terms of, uh, stabilizing. Now that we're reopening. Um, so speaking of reopening, can you talk about how our region came to be the first in Michigan to reopen and, and kind of what went into that?

Warren Call (09:58):

Yeah, so, you know, as we did this survey work and had communications with, with the business community, many of the questions that were coming in from them were regarding safe operating procedures and how to prepare. They asked a lot of great detailed questions on how to set up proper social distancing in their operation. What types of personal protective equipment could they access, what types were appropriate for their organization, where to act, you know, where to, where to procure that. Obviously that was a challenge early on. And a lot of the feedback that we were getting was was, you know, as we, as we got that information out to them, here's what we've done. What else should we do? And really the message that came through very clearly to us was, you know, from, from all businesses, whether they had customer facing operations, or it's just something that that's internal and they were just worried about employees, the message was clear, they're taking it seriously.

Warren Call ([11:00](#)):

They, they are, they were willing to operate responsibly and responsibly and take every precaution that was out there. So as you know, we, we looked at that as an opportunity. We could work together on a phase, reopening, done the right way. And we took the great examples that our local businesses and community partners where we're setting, and we use that to engage with the governor's office. And we shared that message with the governor's office through both Trevor's connect, as well as our partners in the Northern Michigan chamber Alliance to say, look, you know, we've experienced this crisis a little bit differently than downstate. We are taking it seriously. We're working with our medical experts, but our businesses are prepared to open in a responsible way. And we were very glad to have the governor engaged with on that.

Rachel Johnson ([11:54](#)):

So now, um, now that we are, for the most part reopened, obviously there's still a lot of restrictions on our local businesses. What kinds of things are you hearing now from businesses in terms of how it's going and also any ongoing concerns they have?

Warren Call ([12:08](#)):

Yeah. So, um, as part of part of those efforts, and again, continuing the communication, we set up an economic recovery council as part of the, uh, emergency response function. So that is specifically geared toward kind of the longterm, how do we get the economy back on track? Because it's not just reopening, right? It's, it's rebuilding and resiliency. And what we hear from, from those, uh, industry groups that are involved in the economic recovery council is number one, there's a very broad set of challenges. And this isn't probably going to be a surprise. It's a, it's a difficult situation across the board. You know, many businesses are wonder, wondering about and worried about their customers or their, are they going to come back? Are they going to spend, are they going to be engaged in the process? How do we provide childcare for the workers that are returning when there's many childcare providers that aren't able to reopen yet, either because of workforce issues or because of funding issues or a whole host of other challenges, um, there's still concerns about how do you access and properly use personal protective equipment?

Warren Call ([13:16](#)):

You know, we've got, we've got some supplies, but how long can we continue to operate with, uh, with masks for, for your workforce throughout that time? And then, you know, there's challenges with the new unemployment situation. How do we get the workforce, uh, that, that was laid off back, back, uh, involved in feeling safe, feeling like they can return and, you know, still stay safe for their family. So

there's a whole lot, a whole lot of challenges that are, that are coming through. There's a little bit more clarity though, as it relates to what the business community and the nonprofits need from public officials. And that's another area of questions that we're able to, we've been able to, again, collect survey data on, and really what that, that answer is, is clarity.

Warren Call ([14:10](#)):

The communities need clarity on regulations. There's a lot of details that still need to be fleshed out on a whole host of businesses. We've done industry specific forums. So we've, we've talked with just salons and spas, for example, about those, those industry specific guidelines. We've talked with the manufacturers, we've talked with the retail shops and they need clear industry specific guidelines on where things are going to develop so that they know that they can follow the rules they need, they need clear rules in order to follow the rules. And then the other thing from public officials is, is budget clarity. You know, many businesses are in some way impacted or involved with government spending at the state level and the local level. And so getting clarity on what the state budget's going to look like is a key priority. And that, you know, that includes, um, you know, state budget, clarity on schools, so that employers know what their employees are going to need to handle and deal with as far as, you know, what the fall looks like in schools reopening.

Warren Call ([15:18](#)):

So there's a lot, there's a lot that, that public officials need to provide clarity on. And then the final key area that we're hearing a lot of feedback on is, uh, you know, we asked the question to businesses and organizations, what do you need the public to know? And what came back from that question was, again, businesses and organizations are taking this seriously. They are prepared to open safely. They are operating safely. Right now, we are setting an example for the rest of the state and we need, frankly, we need the local consumers, the local customers to feel confident about that. So whether it's walking into the dentist office, walking in to get your haircut, whatever it is, or even just driving past the manufacturing plant that you're never going to enter, but knowing that all those different organizations and businesses have taken the proper steps to operate safely, that that's a message that we need to get out there.

Rachel Johnson ([16:20](#)):

Yeah, it's interesting. Cause I think consumer confidence is such an important part of this. And, um, you know, you talked about how it, you know, at the beginning there was all this uncertainty, it was like chaos, uncertainty. And then there was the light at the end of the tunnel, which is when can we reopen? And now all of a sudden we're kind of through the we've, we've come to the light and like, Whoa, there's still all this additional uncertainty that's going to impact us for probably a long time as we move through the economic recovery phase. And you had talked about the economic recovery council. Can you just talk a little bit about what kind of, what you guys are thinking are going to be maybe the biggest, both opportunities and challenges that we'll face as a region as we now move into the longer term economic recovery?

Warren Call ([17:06](#)):

Yeah. Obviously as we, as we look at the longterm, um, the biggest initial challenge is, and it's not specific to industry, but it's the small businesses, you know, the, the really small businesses that employ frankly, the bulk of the workforce in Northern Michigan. Um, now there's, it is across various industries. But one thing we do have to deal with is the fact that there is a little bit of a lack of diversity in general,

across the Northern Michigan economy. So many of those businesses are related to hospitality and tourism in some way. And there's obviously a lot of uncertainty about what this summer season's going to look like. Um, there's also, um, you know, again with confidence, getting people to go back to their dentist or their doctor, and so much, again, going back to the diversity issue, we have a huge preponderance of employment in healthcare and hospitality. So all those small businesses getting back online and getting their customer base back online, that's that is absolutely the biggest challenge. Now we are working with, um, the DDA in Trevor city, as well as others to support some of those small businesses and help them get, get back on their feet.

Rachel Johnson ([18:24](#)):

Um, I want to talk about the hospitality thing in a second, but I was, I was actually shocked to learn that in the three County region, so grand Travers, Benzie, and Leelanau, we have 8,000 businesses with nine or less full time equivalent employees. Our economy is clearly heavily dependent on smaller businesses, um, on the hospitality side. I think another thing is going to be interesting when you look longterm, we were just talking about this today at, um, at Cherryland, there might be the idea of like traveling to a big conference. We're going to see less and less of that, like the big events and things like that. And we've certainly started to benefit from event travel here in our region. And it's gonna be interesting to watch how that plays out over time too, because people are, are learning. Yeah. Sometimes there are things we want to do in person, but also there are things when I could just as easily do it without having to travel, basically.

Warren Call ([19:16](#)):

Yeah. I think, I think the business travel in general, but especially conference champ travel is, is probably one of the biggest question marks. And obviously that has a big impact on our, our, some of our larger resorts and conference centers here in the hospitality realm. But, you know, really across the board as the health crisis begins to subside, hopefully, and we start this, you know, the reopening phase, the focus and the heavy lifting, really because of that now shift from the public sector to the private sector. And we start thinking about how do we help our businesses, whether they're, you know, a conference center or a soup, you know, just a really small business, how do we help them adjust to what the future holds? And that, like you mentioned that the reason regional resiliency fund that's the idea behind that program is to help some of the smallest businesses with a little bit of some bridge funding so that they can kind of level set and get back to, um, you know, hopefully some, some regular operations overtime.

Rachel Johnson ([20:20](#)):

Yeah. One of the things I loved about, um, the application process for the regional resiliency fund is that it's asking businesses to provide a business plan, that details how they are going to, um, both open safely, but also pivot to be responsive to the expectations of consumers in a kind of a, in a different market that they haven't been in before. And I think to the extent that we can help businesses do that, we can set them up to succeed. We've, we've talked a little bit about, um, obviously some that, you know, some, probably a little unique to our area, some not, but when you look across the board, what do you see as kind of the biggest advantages we have as a region or opportunities we have as a region to, um, come out of this and eventually thrive?

Warren Call ([21:03](#)):

So I think early on, um, there's some messaging that we've worked with our partners on about, again, going back to that consumer confidence, you know, you, some people may have noticed the stay safe to

stay open materials that are, that are downtown and on the web. So reopening in a safe and responsible way that serves as the model for the rest of the state is, is an opportunity. The opportunity to open right, is, is a responsibility to do it correctly. So we have to be focused on that. But as we think about what does the future look like? I think that, you know, there's so many people that, um, are going through unexpected change and difficulty right now, as we think about people both locally, as well as across the Midwest, you know, w they're reevaluating their future right now. And we have a quality of life that I think can be a really key asset to leverage as we talk about our own economic resiliency and by resiliency, I mean, not just rebounding back, but being stronger than we were before.

Warren Call ([22:07](#)):

So using that combination, we have of natural beauty compliant combined with great communities, uh, the cultural and creative assets that we have. We, we have an opportunity to, to sell that kind of broad quality of life to, you know, people that are, that are really looking at, okay, this is not what our age we're expected to be. What's next. And when you combine that with the fact that we're kind of already at a tipping point of entrepreneurial buzz, we have some special things going on here, as far as, um, as we call them tech trade and creative industries, the quality of life combined with the entrepreneurial buzz that's going on. I think we've got a great story to tell, and I think it can help us both, you know, retain workers and great businesses here, but also hopefully attract some new ones.

Rachel Johnson ([23:04](#)):

Yeah. I was also thinking I attended a webinar that you guys put on actually recently about remote work and kind of becoming an area that, uh, is very attractive to remote workers. And what's interesting to me is you've, uh, I mean, I could, I could make up a number. I don't have one, we probably have a big subset of the population that was previously in a very traditional, you know, work from the office role that might suddenly be in a position to become a remote worker who all of a sudden that that group is saying, well, wow, now that I'm a remote worker, I can kind of do this from anywhere. And we could become a region that, that is one of the anywheres. They want to do it from because of some of those quality of life things too. So you could potentially see population growth and, and with those remote workers come other workers, right? Whether it's a trailing spouse comes kids in your schools, et cetera, for people who were previously stuck, not stuck, um, kind of isolated to the location of wherever their office was, if that makes sense. So I think there's a lot of opportunities there when you look kind of in your crystal ball towards the future, what do you, how, what do you see for our economy? What's our, what's, what's going to be different about our regional economy in five years than it was in January of 2020, partially in response to this. Yeah,

Warren Call ([24:15](#)):

I think that, so part of this is me looking forward and part of this is, is a little bit hopeful too. One of the things that has come out of this is really strong community collaborations across the private sector and the public sector. And my hope is that that continues because I think that teamwork is, is just central to this. Despite the uncertainty that currently exists, you know, teamwork and collaboration will prove critical to our resiliency and recovery. Um, certainly as you touched on the future of work, you know, we've got this role light experiment with remote work, and that I believe gives the grand terrors region a huge opportunity to attract that workforce that can work from anywhere. If you can work from anywhere, this is not a bad place to do it. And where many people and many businesses may not have been comfortable with it six months ago, people are way more comfortable with it now than they were back then.

Warren Call ([25:10](#)):

And I think that that's, that's a big opportunity and those people can bring their spending their frankly, their taxes, their tax payments, their great ideas, uh, their families here to this region. And I think we can make this region, uh, an attractive choice for those creative industry professionals, technology traded industries, entrepreneurs who are looking for high quality of life and, and career growth. And I think we can offer, you know, that, that successful future for them. And that's, you know, one of the things that we're, we're focused on coming out of this, we were lucky enough to host a focus group, frankly, just before the shutdown happened. We had, we already planned it out and luckily got it in like mid March before everything shut down. But the focus group was, was geared toward those kind of early to mid career people that can work from anywhere that have a somewhat high, um, you know, uh, income level, somewhat high education level, uh, offer, you know, great opportunity for us to expand our workforce here.

Warren Call ([26:22](#)):

And so we talked to a group of people that had been in the area for, um, three years or less, and many of them a lot less than three years. And there was some really interesting things that came out of that, um, that focus group and really what it amounted to was quality, which we've already talked about a little bit, right? Quality of natural environment, quality of community quality of the job market, but also the depth of that. Well, they wanted to see depth. They wanted to see the cultural amenities. They want them to see intellectual curiosity in, in the community. They wanted to see entrepreneurial, excitement and community. We've, we've got a lot of those things that these groups are looking for. And then the final area. And this is again, where we're trying to make an impact is openness. So a community that is welcoming to diversity and diverse populations, a community that can come together around creative solutions for childcare and housing. Those are the things that we need to develop if we're going to be successful going forward. So our continued advocacy efforts are focused on rural business policy at the state and the federal level to help develop that. And then at the local level, I think we need, we need to develop, you know, more forward thinking solutions and a welcoming attitude.

Rachel Johnson ([27:44](#)):

Yeah. It's, it's, I mean, this is, you're talking to much bigger scale, but one of the things I've been kind of talking about on a few of the local organizations I'm on the board of is I think that the big businesses are kind of have two opportunities here. Like one, you can go into the saying, how do we survive and that, and I'm not criticizing that cause I get it. But I think what's really interesting is the businesses that go into a crisis like this and say, wait a minute, how do we thrive? And I, and I think as a region, we're better off if we're looking for those opportunities. Um, and that, and that's not to, that's not to be dismissive of the need to survive. Um, but just that we're not going to last forever. And when, when it's all said and done and we come through it, I think as a community, we have a real opportunity to be ahead. And I, and I, I think people need that hopeful message. I know I do.

Warren Call ([28:31](#)):

Absolutely. And you know, you, you put it very well. What we're trying to do is exactly that and, and the way I refer to it as accelerate out of the turn, when everyone else is slowing down, there's a lot of uncertainty. If you can accelerate, if we, as a region can accelerate out of this, we're going to be in a good spot going forward.

Rachel Johnson ([28:53](#)):

Well, we're, we're coming up on time. But one thing that I did want to make a plug for, and I won't make you be the one to make a plug for it. Um, I've been so impressed with the work Trevor's connect has done through this to kind of serve as both the voice for the business community and to the public sector officials, trying to make decisions. And then also communicating back to the business community decisions and issues being dealt with in the public sector. And to me, what it has really, um, reinforced is how valuable that public private partnership is for our region. So thank, thank you and the team at Travis connect for all that work, because we would not be doing as well as we are right now without that.

Warren Call ([29:33](#)):

Well, it's our pleasure. And, uh, you know, I'm lucky that I've got a great team and we are here to support the committee.

Rachel Johnson ([29:39](#)):

Awesome. Thank you for joining me. Thanks Rachel.