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For PSE&G leader, communication key to success

Courrier News

By CELANIE POLANICK

Staff Writer

To his colleagues, PSE&G subsidiary leader Tim Comerford is known as a busy man -- a problem solver, a doer who pours time into his work, his family and the community.

Comerford, 51, is the large-company category winner of the 2006 Somerset County Business Partnership 2006 Outstanding Business Person and Economic Vitality awards.

The Outstanding Business Person awards recognize individuals who have made a difference and contributed significantly to the success and growth of their companies. The awards are presented in categories based on business size, plus nonprofit and young entrepreneur categories. Comerford will receive the award at a ceremony Dec. 5.

At work, Comerford is president of PSE&G Area Development, the economic development subsidiary of Public Service Energy & Gas, New Jersey's largest electric and gas utility with about 3 million customers. He runs a five-person team that attempts to attract businesses to New Jersey and helps existing businesses expand with a full range of real estate and economic development services.

Comerford works with state agencies, real estate brokers and other companies to help his clients succeed. He travels around the state to oversee projects personally, often taking company officials on tours of properties that could become their new facilities.

He started at PSE&G not long after graduating from New Jersey Institute of Technology with an engineering degree in 1978, and he was plopped straight into the marketing sector.

At the time, engineers had to deal directly with clients, and even at the entry level, Comerford was part of some of the biggest projects in his department -- forcing him to learn how to use his engineering background and his communication skills in tandem, and fast, he said.

He went on to earn a master's degree in marketing and economics from Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison and to work in the utility's rates and load management department to help retail clients save on energy consumption. He also spent about two years in the 1980s helping PSE&G keep up as construction and development along the Hudson River waterfront boomed.

In fall 1988, Comerford came to PSE&G's Economic Development Department and rose through the ranks to become president about five years ago.

Now, it's the variety of people and places that makes his work exciting, Comerford said. "The great part about this job is that one day it's one thing, the next day it's something else," he said. "We're usually doing something different every day, if not five or six things in one day. We've always made a great team up here."

Listening skills

Comerford has always been a people person, and his negotiation skills are kept sharp by the wide variety of interests he represents. The secret is listening to people on all sides of every negotiation, he said.

Comerford garners high praise from colleagues.

For two decades, he has shared clients -- and a love of the New Jersey Devils -- with David Houston, president of Colliers Houston & Company, a commercial real estate broker.

Comerford is a veritable walking Rolodex and can be especially good at wading through cumbersome state bureaucracy, said Houston, who describes his friend as an easy-going, devoted family man.

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"He does a great job," Houston said. "If you need something, you call him up, and with his contacts in public service, other agencies and private industry, he gets the job done."

Comerford is a good boss, too, and has developed numerous dynamic and successful programs for the company in the past 20 years, said Richard Franklin, who worked with him for two decades at PSE&G before leaving for the Advance Realty Group.

In short, Comerford is "a very bright guy," Franklin said.

His list of charitable and community activities is formidable, too.

Last fall, Comerford received an award for community involvement from the Family of Nazareth Inc. Missionary Seminar. He is an officer of the Newark Special Improvement District, a trustee of the Morris County Economic Development Corporation and a co-chairman of the annual golf outing for the Raritan Valley Community College Foundation. He also serves on the board of regents of Felician College.

Comerford is co-chairman of the Economic and Community Development Chamber for the Somerset County Business Partnership and is president of the state chapter of CoreNet, the professional association for corporate real estate executives.

Community commitment

Above all, he is invested in his community, said neighbor Pete Hausmann, who remembers being welcomed to his family's new home in Hopatcong 14 years ago by Comerford and his wife, Debbie.

An avid golfer and fisherman, Comerford spends several nights a week tending to his many commitments but finds time for his family and friends, Hausmann said. Comerford once spent a Thanksgiving helping Hausmann fix his boiler and stayed until the job was finished, at about 2 a.m.

"He's got the biggest heart of anybody I know," Hausmann said. "He'll do anything for you. He'd give you the shirt off his back. He's just a great guy."

He's well-known throughout New Jersey, Hausmann said. "You go anywhere with him, he knows everybody -- it's incredible."

Although their father is an ardent advocate for his home state to his clients, Comerford's children aren't being pressured to follow in his footsteps or to stay close to home.

Comerford's son Matthew, 22, graduated last spring from Champlain College in Burlington, Vt., with a degree in digital forensics, and his daughter, Mary Beth, 19, is thinking about a being pre-med major at Towson State University outside Baltimore, Md. Their brother, William, 17, is still a junior in high school.

To them, and to young and aspiring businesspeople, Comerford offers this advice:

"Communications is absolutely critical. Regardless of what field you're in, or where you want to go in life, communication is one of the most critical things you have to deal with."

Whether it's negotiation, marketing or any other kind of interpersonal interaction, emphasize communication and find passion in the work itself, he said.

"Find something you love to do. Once you find something you really enjoy, it doesn't make it work -- it makes it something that you're really excited about."