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By **Lee Howard**
Business Editor

✉ l.howard@theday.com

Bruce Flax likes the idea of spreading the word about Mystic and all of southeastern Connecticut far and wide, and he's always looking for a new way to do it.

This season, the Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce president is banking on a new vehicle, literally: a converted ice cream and mail truck that will travel mostly in a 30- to 50-mile radius spreading the word about local attractions at community events.

"Our feeling is that we are the number one tourist attraction in the state, so we can use that to help everybody," Flax told me Tuesday when we sat down for coffee and diet Cokes at the Popover Cafe in Mystic with the chamber's new membership manager, Megan Yardis. "We're gonna bring it to events like the Big E and promote the region."

Local artist Abbie Park of AP Art & Graphic Design created the look of the Mystic Region truck's exterior, including a map replete with local references such as Ocean Beach Park and the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, the Submarine Force Museum in Groton and the Dinosaur Park in Montville.

"Mystic is so iconic," Flax said. "We're hoping that we can get people, instead of staying three days here, to stay five days or seven days. And get them to go out and see all the stuff in this state of theirs."

The idea, said Flax, would be for the chamber to drive to an event in the colorful Mystic Region truck and hand out promotional material encouraging people to visit southeastern Connecticut. The truck, purchased with COVID funds over eBay from a man in Texas and then outfitted at a total cost of \$34,000, debuted last month during the Mystic Irish Parade.

"Right now, we have the truck done and we're gonna work on the inside of it and then figure it out," Flax said. "It's been a journey and a labor of love."

Flax, now in his fourth year leading the chamber, has overseen one of the most successful eras ever in downtown Mystic, which got a boost initially during COVID-19 when people were flowing out of the cities to discover areas within a few hours' drive. In Mystic, they found one of the state's most charming outdoor shopping centers at Olde Mistick Village as well as a bevy of great restaurants and the sweet-treat magnet called Sift, whose owner, Adam Young, won the 2018 Best Baker in America designation on the Food Network.

While the Mystic Aquarium and Mystic Seaport have been year-round draws for a while, now the historic downtown has become an anchor as well.

"I think the new places that are opening continue to help us from the foodies standpoint," Flax said. "On weekends, when it's nice out, we see all 50 out-of-state plates."

Flax has helped manage some of Mystic's most successful events, including the annual Mystic Outdoor Art Festival, and this year the chamber has added the Tarzan Brown road race to its list of activities to promote, along with a brand-new pickleball tournament planned at Mystic Indoor Sports on April 27.

In addition to all the regular events sponsored by the chamber, it also runs the GoMystic app that connects visitors with local businesses, giving the region a dynamic online presence that attracts tens of thousands of people every year. The chamber also has a regular presence on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram, where its "Five Things" videos highlight local businesses, generating 15,000 to 22,000 hits weekly.

Another new social media program that's about to launch will highlight people who work downtown.

The emergence of Mystic as one of the nation's, not just the region's, biggest tourism attractions has created a boom-town atmosphere that businesses enjoy, though residents often grumble about traffic in the summer, and even now in what used to be called the "shoulder season" in the spring and fall. But Flax said he doesn't believe in letting up on the messaging that brings people here.

"To me, it's never enough because you never know when it's going to stop," he said. "So you don't want to you take your foot off the gas and pause for anything because you just don't know what's going to happen. I'm always for promoting and getting people here, but being responsible about it."

Flax pointed out that the downtown merchants group doesn't meet anymore, so it's up to the chamber to coordinate events and help drive people to all the restaurants and shops.

"Everybody's really working together and for the better good," he said. "We don't want to sit down or sit still, so we are always trying to elevate what we do."

Lee Howard is The Day's business editor. To reach him, email l.howard@theday.com.