

Business Connections



NOVEMBER 2025

Centralia - Chehalis
Chamber of Commerce

Promote ♦ Protect ♦ Inform

Inside This Edition: November is about giving thanks and features Gesa, White Pass, and Flags of Honor

Gesa Credit Union: Growing with Purpose, Staying True to Community Roots

This past year, Gesa Credit Union acquired Security State Bank, expanding its presence with new branches in Centralia and Chehalis. As the transition wraps up in November 2025, the Chamber sat down with two members of the Gesa team — Andy Alexander, AVP of Southwest Commercial Lending, and James Rothwell, VP of Strategic Initiatives and Administration. The conversation was relaxed and engaging, with both sharing quick wit, genuine enthusiasm for their work, and a deep passion for Gesa’s people and its unique blend of rural roots and big-city services.

By Cynthia Mudge
Chamber Executive Director

Gesa Credit Union – originally known as the General Electric Supervisors Association – began in 1953, serving the administrative “white-collar” employees at the Hanford site in the Tri-Cities area (a separate credit union served the blue-collar staff). Since those early days, Gesa has grown immensely, evolving from a single-company credit union to a state-chartered financial institution with branches across Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.

“The banking and credit union industry has changed dramatically since 1953,” said Andy Alexander, who was also a 3rd generation family member holding a leadership position with Security State Bank at the time of the acquisition. “Banks and credit unions have been consolidating.”

While consolidation can sometimes concern customers, in Gesa’s case, it has brought significant benefits—especially in commercial lending. Under Security State Bank, the maximum lending capacity was \$18-20 million to one borrower at the highest point. Now, as part of Gesa, that capacity is nearly triple, opening the door

for larger development projects that create jobs and housing.

Small businesses also gain an advantage through Gesa’s top-rated SBA (Small Business Administration) lending program, which improves access to business loans. “Paul Long started this program two years ago, building it from scratch,” added James Rothwell, VP of Strategic Initiatives and Administration.

Consumers have also seen immediate benefits since the transition from Security State Bank to Gesa. The number of branches has expanded to over 40, technology and online banking tools have improved, and customers now enjoy the credit union experience as member-owners, which generally means higher deposit rates and lower loan rates. “We’ve also kept much of the staff our customers have grown to trust,” noted Alexander.

Despite its growth in size and reach, Gesa continues to uphold its community-first values, maintaining strong roots in the rural communities it serves. Education—particularly financial education for youth—remains a key priority. One example is the Gesa Affinity Debit Card Program, which allows members to support local



Shown here is Andy Alexander (left) and James Rothwell. *Photo provided*

schools, teams, and nonprofit organizations simply by using their debit cards. Since 2015, “We’ve donated more than \$3 million for schools and our Local Heroes program,” said Rothwell. “And in 2024 alone, we gave back another \$4.9 million to charitable organizations across the state.” Currently, Gesa offers 70 different Affinity Cards.

Looking ahead, Gesa plans to expand its High School Credit Union Program to Chehalis and Centralia High

Schools. The program gives students real-world banking experience by operating Gesa branches within their schools. One student intern serves as branch manager, while others staff the branch. “We have 24 high school branches,” said Rothwell. “The program meets all state education requirements for operating a school-based enterprise.”

One standout success story highlights a student who began as an intern, worked in a high school branch, earned a Gesa

scholarship, completed college, and now helps run the very same give-back programs that helped launch their career.

For Alexander, Gesa’s values feel familiar. His connection to community banking runs deep—his family’s involvement dates back to 1910, when his grandfather, J.W. Alexander, enlisted the help of his brother, J.T. Alexander, shortly after taking the helm of the bank. Andy’s father, J.W. Jr., later became president of the bank in the 1980s after working his way up through the branches and lending departments.

When evaluating the transition to Gesa, Alexander wanted a partner who shared Security State Bank’s community values. “We found that with Gesa,” he said.

Rothwell, who joined the credit union industry in 2009 and earned his degree from Boise State University in 2007, echoed that sentiment. Though based in Richland, he has made frequent visits to Lewis County to support the transition and connect with local team members and members.

As both leaders emphasize, Gesa’s mission remains clear: to be a trusted, lifelong financial partner and a force for good in every community it serves.

Thanksgiving: A Time to Give Back and Give Thanks

By Rep. Peter Abbarno
20th Legislative District

As Thanksgiving approaches, I find myself reflecting on what this season truly means. It’s more than a day of turkey, football, and family traditions — it’s a time to slow down, take stock of our blessings, and recognize

the people who make our communities strong. Thanksgiving is not just about being thankful — it’s about living thankfully.

Giving thanks is powerful. It reminds us that none of us walk through life alone. Our communities thrive because of teachers who inspire, volunteers who serve, first

responders who protect, and neighbors who lend a hand without being asked. These individuals embody the heart of Thanksgiving every day, often without recognition or reward. To them — and to all who give of their time, talents, and hearts — I say thank you.

But Thanksgiving is also a call to action. Gratitude becomes most meaningful when it moves us to give back. Whether we donate to a local cause, support a community event, or simply help someone in need, every act of giving strengthens the fabric of our community.

There are many organizations to support and many causes to champion. During this holiday season, I hope



Peter Abbarno

you find your passion for giving and continue all year long.

For my family, two very important events stand out. First, the Thorbeckes’ Turkey Trot presented by Althausen Rayan Abbarno. This fun run/walk is held annually at the Chehalis Thorbeckes location on Thanksgiving morning is a wonderful event that brings families together to start the day with fun, fitness, and charity — supporting local organizations like the Chehalis Foundation and the Boys & Girls Club of Lewis County.

This tradition brings our families together and delivers meaningful support for the entire community. You can register early at any Thorbeckes facility in Centralia, Chehalis or Rochester to guarantee a unique commemorative shirt or on Thanksgiving morning before the Trot in Chehalis.

Another event that holds

special meaning for me is the Special Olympics Polar Plunge, which I help coordinate every year. “Cold hands, cold feet, but warm hearts” has been the theme since the Lewis County plunge moved to Mayfield Lake!

Watching hundreds of people brave the icy waters for such a great cause reminds me that giving back doesn’t always have to be comfortable — sometimes it’s cold, sometimes it’s early in the morning, but it’s always worth it. Every splash and every smile supports athletes and families across Washington who inspire us all with their courage and joy.

You can support a current Lewis County Icicle Brigade team member or join the team by visiting <https://impact.sowa.org/LC-PolarPlunge-26>.

This Thanksgiving, I encourage all of us to think about both giving thanks and giving back. Let’s thank those who dedicate themselves to serving others — and let’s find ways to serve. Whether it’s running, plunging, volunteering, or simply being kind, every gesture matters.

We are stronger when we give. We are richer when we share. And we are at our very best when we live each day with gratitude in our hearts and service in our hands.

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Rep. Peter Abbarno, R-Chehalis, represents the 20th Legislative District and is the House Republican Caucus Chair.

Security State Bank is now Gesa Credit Union.

But its employees, community commitment, and legacy are here to stay.



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White Pass Ski Area: A Beloved Winter Destination



Photo provided

White Pass Ski Area is best known for great skiing but other activities abound for non-skiers as well.

By Cynthia Mudge

Chamber Executive Director

The White Pass Ski Area has long been a favorite winter escape for skiers, snowboarders, tubers, and anyone who loves pristine mountain landscapes and outdoor adventure. Originally founded in 1952 by the Yakima Ski Club, the area took shape as Highway 12 was being constructed to connect Western and Eastern Washington. The club saw the perfect opportunity to relocate to White Pass—making it possible for skiers from both sides of the mountains to enjoy the same slopes.

One of the most striking features of White Pass is its setting—surrounded by the Gifford Pinchot and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests – which provide sweeping alpine vistas and a true sense of wilderness.

In 2021, five local families, each with a deep passion for skiing and their community,

purchased the ski area and have since made significant investments in its future. Among the recent improvements includes replacement of chairlift #4 with a new four-seat lift, and construction has begun on a new base lodge scheduled to open in the fall of 2026. The lodge will feature a dedicated learning center designed to inspire and train the next generation of snow enthusiasts.

According to Kathleen Goyette, Director of Skier Services, the 2024 season was the strongest on record—a reflection of both regional population growth and the rising popularity of winter recreation. White Pass encourages planning ahead by purchasing your lift ticket online at skiwhitepass.com. “We carefully manage the mountain’s capacity to prevent overcrowded slopes and assure an excellent customer experience.” Goyette explained. “There’s now plenty of parking, and our reservation process has eliminated long



Photo provided

White Pass Ski Area is a family destination.

lift lines.” The system, first implemented during COVID-19, worked so well that it’s become a permanent part of operations. To further enhance the experience. “White Pass encourages planning ahead by purchasing your lift ticket online at skiwhitepass.com. We carefully manage the mountain’s capacity to prevent overcrowded slopes and assure an excellent customer experience.” White Pass has continued to invest in snowmaking. Additional guns address key areas—helping maintain skiable conditions on lower slopes or heavily used runs.

The White Pass Ski Foundation extends the mountain’s mission by providing free ski lessons, ensuring that the joy of skiing remains accessible to all. The foundation programs serve middle school students on both sides of the pass. (White Pass School District as well).

For seasoned snow lovers, White Pass encompasses 1,402

acres with a base elevation of 4,500 feet and a vertical drop of 2,020 feet. The longest run stretches three miles along the Couloir Express, while the Nordic Center offers over 16 miles of cross-country trails that weave alongside scenic snowshoe paths.

A highlight of every winter season is the White Pass Winter Carnival, now celebrating its 40th year from February 28 through March 1. The beloved event features a 5,000-square-foot, 2.5-story snow castle where families can enjoy live music, tubing, mazes, and snowboarding. The festivities culminate with a dazzling Saturday night fireworks show that lights up the mountain sky.

Visitors can find lodging, dining, and activity details on the White Pass Ski Area website. One of its most popular new features is a collection of live webcams—perfect for checking the weather, the views, and of course, the snowfall. www.SkiWhitePass.com

Flags of Honor

By Cynthia Mudge

Chamber Executive Director

Businesses and individuals can honor a veteran, first-responder, or other significant individual in their community through Centralia Rotary’s Flag of Honor program.

The Centralia-Chehalis Chamber of Commerce is partnering with the Centralia Rotary Club to expand Rotary’s popular flag subscription initiative with the addition of the new Flags of Honor program for businesses.

Launched in 2024, the Centralia Rotary Flags program quickly became a community favorite. The program allows individuals to purchase an annual subscription, through which volunteer Rotarians place American flags at their homes on four designated holidays each year: Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, and Veterans Day. Flags are installed before each holiday and removed shortly afterward.

Building on that success, the Flags of Honor program offers individuals and businesses the opportunity to honor veterans, first responders, or other significant figures by sponsoring a personalized American flag. Each flag includes the name of the honoree and the sponsor.

“Flags of Honor is a new way to recognize a loved one and our way of connecting back to the community,” said Centralia Rotary President-elect Erik Blanco. He noted that the idea for the program came after several local businesses expressed interest in participating and displaying their own flags.

Chamber member businesses have the added benefit of choosing to have their sponsored flag displayed on the Chamber lawn, prominently facing Chamber



Photo provided

Shown here are Coralee Taylor, Board Chair for Centralia-Chehalis Chamber and Erik Broncho, President-Elect for Centralia Rotary.

Way. Additionally, Flags of Honor sponsors will receive recognition on the Chamber’s website, in its monthly e-newsletter, on the Chamber’s electronic billboard, and in Business Connections, the

Chamber’s business publication.

The Flags of Honor sponsorship is \$250, which includes the personalized flag and installation/removal for one year. Standard home subscriptions are \$80.

For more information or to subscribe, visit centraliarotaryflags.com.

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To learn more about the Chamber, visit chamberway.com.



BIZZBUZZ



WHAT'S THE BUZZ?



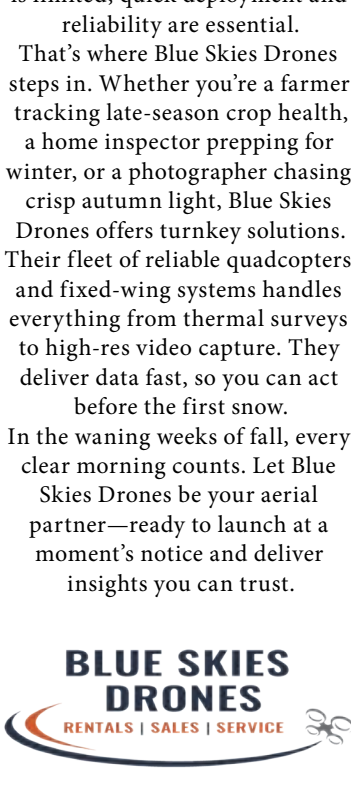


The Sky is the Limit with Blue Sky Drones!

As November approaches, crisp air and clearer skies set the stage for serious drone work. With fall in full swing, the foliage has thinned, daylight hours are short, and weather windows are precious. It's a time when drone operators must act smart, choosing calm, low-wind mornings to get clean aerial footage or inspect infrastructure. Drones shine this season in many roles: scouting roof damage before snow, mapping erosion before winter, monitoring wildlife migrations, or capturing moody seasonal content. Because daylight is limited, quick deployment and reliability are essential.

That's where Blue Skies Drones steps in. Whether you're a farmer tracking late-season crop health, a home inspector prepping for winter, or a photographer chasing crisp autumn light, Blue Skies Drones offers turnkey solutions. Their fleet of reliable quadcopters and fixed-wing systems handles everything from thermal surveys to high-res video capture. They deliver data fast, so you can act before the first snow.

In the waning weeks of fall, every clear morning counts. Let Blue Skies Drones be your aerial partner—ready to launch at a moment's notice and deliver insights you can trust.



The Pumpkin Trains at the Chehalis Centralia Railroad

Chehalis, WA – On October 18 and 19, The Pumpkin Trains depart the depot on Saturday and Sunday at 11:30am and 1:00pm and 2:30pm. Children, as well as adults are encouraged to wear costumes and help create a fun filled Halloween atmosphere. All excursions are approximately 60 minutes long. Goody bags of treats and Pumpkins are ready for eager children under age

The Evergreen Playhouse presents: The Best Christmas Pageant Ever

Performance Dates:
December 5-21, 2025
Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30pm
Sundays at 2pm
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Thursday December 11 at 7:30pm
*Please note - Saturday, December 13, the performance will be at 2pm
In this hilarious Christmas classic, a couple struggling to put on a

church Christmas pageant is faced with casting the Herdman kids – probably the most inventively awful kids in history. You won't believe the mayhem – and the fun – when the Herdmans collide head-on with the story of Christmas! A great way to celebrate the holidays with family and friends!! Bring a copy of this article with you for a free small popcorn and non alcoholic drink. Details and tickets at evergreenplayhouse.com



Fun Facts with Exodus Electric!

Interesting Fact Alert! Did you know that Bobby Fischer, the legendary chess grandmaster, once worked as an electrician's assistant? Before he became a world-renowned chess champion, Fischer had a hands-on job that involved understanding circuits and connections—skills not too different from the strategies he would later use on the chessboard!

At Exodus Electric, LLC, we celebrate the hard work and dedication that goes into every trade, from chess to electrical work. Remember, every master starts somewhere! Contact us today, 360-623-7177.

Prepare for the Holidays at Let's Play Something!

Let's Play Something is your first stop for birthdays, holidays, and every gift-giving occasion. From stocking stuffers to big surprises, we've got something for all ages and interests—perfect for family game nights, kids' parties, and thoughtful gifts.

We're proud to be a local, family-owned toy store that makes shopping fun and easy. Open 7 days a week, we offer free gift wrapping so you can walk out ready to celebrate.

Whether you're checking off your Christmas list, finding the perfect stocking stuffer, or picking out a last-minute birthday gift, we're here

to help you make every moment special. Stop by and see why Let's Play Something has become a favorite in our community.



Join a Local Mental Health Group with NAMI!

NAMI Lewis County is a peer-led support organization for individuals and their families struggling with mental health conditions. We provide weekly support groups for adults. Monday nights at 6 p.m. is our Family Support Group. Our office, where the family support group meets is located at 1641 Kresky Ave. Ste. 3 Centralia, WA 98531. This is a place for families to find solace with others who may have similar experiences and get resources that may be beneficial to their circumstances. We have a new Connections Support Group out at the St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church St. Rte. #505, Winlock, WA 98596 Monday nights from 6-7:30 p.m. Our Regularly scheduled Tuesday Connections meeting will be moved to Fridays at 2 p.m. from now on. The Friday groups are hosted at the office in Centralia. Please reach out to us directly if you have any questions at our office number 360.5591363 and we will return your call as soon as we can. Contact us by email at NamiLewisCountywa@gmail.com. Visit our websites to find additional information: NAMI.org, NAMIWA.org, or our local site NAMILC.org



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optical spending. In Washington State, contact lens and glasses prescriptions are valid for two years. We are happy to fill prescriptions from other offices- and no appointment is needed to be personally styled by our opticians. Lastly, we will be closed for Christmas week this year, so want to make sure you have plenty of time to come in before then! We look forward to seeing you at Rainier Eye, 145 S Market Blvd in Chehalis.



RAINIER EYE



Come See The Nutcracker with SWW Dance Center!

Southwest Washington Dance Center's performing company, Southwest Washington Dance Ensemble, will present the 28th Annual production of "The Nutcracker". The ballet will take place in the "state of the art" Corbet Theatre, on the campus of Centralia College, on December 19, 20, 21. Performance times are 7:30 pm on December 19, 2:00 & 7:30 pm on December 20 and 1:00 and 5:30 pm on December 21. Many area businesses and individuals have contributed to making "The Nutcracker" a success. As a 501 (C) 3, SWDC appreciates sponsors that contribute to the production. Ticket prices are: \$27.00-Adults \$20.00-Seniors 62+, Military and children, 18 and under. Tickets are available online at swwdance.org or by calling the Dance Center. SWDC is at 437 N. Market Blvd. in Chehalis. After December 13th, tickets will only be available online, at the box office of Corbet Theatre on the campus of Centralia College from the hours of 3:00-7:00 pm or by telephone. All seating is reserved. For information regarding the "Nutcracker" visit the web site at www.swwdance.org or call 360-748-4789.



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Sticklin-Brown Funeral Chapel hosted an amazing Business After Hours in October. Those who attended enjoyed historic tours of the building including an interesting presentation in their prep room, a historical scavenger hunt with prizes, raffles, and great food. 1437 S. Gold Street, Centralia. www.dignitymemorial.com



The Chamber hosted its annual Candidate Debates at O’Blarney’s Irish Pub in Centralia. Seven positions in Centralia and Chehalis were invited to participate. Thank you to Chamber Board Member Lindy Waring with KELA/KMNT (timekeeper), as well as our MCs Chamber Board Member Jeff Yanish, and KELA’s Ryan Trotter.



Downtown Chehalis welcomed a new bank in September. OlyFed Bank had its grand opening at its newest location, 535 N. Market Blvd. www.olyfed.com/chehalis-branch



The amazing team at His and Hers Hormone Health & Wellness celebrated their new location with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and open house. 1292 S. Market Blvd. hisandherschehalis.com



Good Health Nutrition Center celebrated a milestone 35 years in business on September 10! Festivities included a live broadcast by KIT1, food samples, and specials. www.goodhealthnutrition.net



Espresso! PNW Cookie Co. held its official grand opening October 28 of its espresso and cookie stand with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony. 272 North Market Blvd., Chehalis. pnwcookies.com



Rooted in Lewis County celebrated a new location and refreshed mission with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and open house. 113 W. Maple Street, Centralia. www.rootedinlc.org

UPCOMING
CHAMBER EVENTS!

RIBBON CUTTINGS

Firehouse Constructions
Friday, November 7
Noon
Centralia Tigers Stadium at the Concession Stand
2526 Mt. Vista Road, Centralia

Artisan’z Nook
Saturday, November 8
Noon
20347 Old Hwy. 99 SW,
Centralia

Cosmic Tattoo
Thursday, November 13
11 am
531 N. Tower, Centralia

Centerville Western Wear
Wednesday, November 19
Noon
1500 Lum Road, Centralia

My 2 Scents K9 LLC
Friday, December 5
Noon
585 Leonard Road, Onalaska

OTHER EVENTS
COMING UP

District 20
Legislative Forum
Thursday, November 6
7:30 – 8:30 am

Jeremy’s Farm To Table
576 W Main Street, Chehalis

The Legislative Forum features Senator John Braun, Representative Ed Orcutt and Representative Peter Abbarno.

75th Annual Santa Parade!
Saturday, December 6
11 am
Visit chamberway.com for parade application.

BUSINESS AFTER HOURS

Chehalis Outfitters
Thursday, November 20
5 – 7 pm
1757 N. National Ave.
Turkey Bowl, Prizes, Free Traeger Demo & Samples – Fun for all ages!

Holiday Member Party & Ribbon Cutting Ceremony
The Chronicle
Thursday, December 18
5 – 7 pm
215 N. Pearl Street, Centralia

We are all excited to help The Chronicle celebrate their new space and what better way than with a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony and holiday party!



Schedule a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony!

The Chamber offers Ribbon Cutting Ceremonies as a free service to members and non-members. It is our way of acknowledging the hard work and investment of time and money to opening, expanding, moving, or re-branding a business.

To learn more or secure a date call 360-748-8885 or email director@chamberway.com