

Business Connections



JANUARY 2026

Centralia - Chehalis
Chamber of Commerce

Promote ♦ Protect ♦ Inform

Inside This Edition: I-5 Cars, Resilience, and Looking Ahead to 2026

I-5 Cars: Thriving Through Change

By Cynthia Mudge

Chamber Executive Director

I-5 Cars is a prominent, locally owned automotive business that has weathered recessions, pandemics, supply shortages, and even natural disasters—emerging stronger each time. Purchased in 2002 by the Pehl family, the original dealerships included Uhlmann Motors, Uhlmann RV, and a Toyota franchise. Today, operating as the I-5 Auto Group, the organization has grown to six dealerships: I-5 Toyota, Awesome Ford, Awesome RV, Awesome Chevrolet, I-5 CJDR (Chrysler, Jeep, Dodge, and Ram), and Volkswagen of Olympia.

When the Pehls acquired the dealerships, Heidi Pehl entered the traditionally male-dominated automotive industry with no prior experience. What she did bring was a clear vision for how customers should be treated—rooted in transparency, respect, and trust throughout the buying experience. That philosophy continues today through her son, Robert Pehl, Vice President and General Manager.

Robert has held his current position for the past seven years, but his connection to the business began much earlier. He grew up doing homework at the Toyota dealership and started working for his mother at



Robert Pehl is the Vice President and General Manager for I-5 Cars.

age 12, detailing cars and helping wherever needed. As a teenager, his passion was baseball—a pursuit that led him to the University of Washington and eventually to being drafted by the Kansas City Royals. After three years in professional baseball, Robert returned to Chehalis and joined I-5 Cars as used car manager.

He quickly discovered a passion for working with people and serving customers from diverse backgrounds and generations. Like his mother, Robert believes that exceptional customer service begins with taking care of employees. That philosophy has paid off: the I-5 Auto

Group consistently maintains one of the lowest employee turnover rates in the industry.

Over the years, the I-5 Auto Group has navigated numerous challenges by maintaining a forward-growth mindset. Robert credits much of their success to what he calls a “Kaizen Spirit,” inspired by Toyota’s philosophy of continuous improvement. “It’s the idea that if you’re not growing, you’re dying,” he said.

The pandemic brought significant change, but also opportunity. Among the positive shifts were expanded online sales and enhanced customer services, including mobile service options



and vehicle pick-up and delivery. “Eighty percent of our sales now start online,” noted Robert. While many customers still prefer to finalize purchases in person, a growing number complete the entire process digitally—including having their vehicle delivered.

Maintaining high-quality customer service remains a priority as Lewis County’s population grows and online sales extend the company’s reach beyond the local area. With more than 250 employees, the I-5 Auto Group focuses on building trust and long-term relationships through transparency, prompt and courteous service in both sales and service departments, and active community engagement.

Community involvement is central to the I-5 Auto

Group’s mission. The company participates in numerous fundraisers, with its largest being the annual I-5 Car Raffle. Each year, a vehicle is raffled off, and local school groups and nonprofit organizations sell tickets and keep the proceeds. “Last year alone, the raffle raised \$100,000,” said Robert. To date, the program has generated more than \$1.2 million for the community.

Support for education and youth athletics is a particular focus, with beneficiaries including the Lewis County Boys & Girls Club, W.F. West High School auto mechanics program, the Chehalis Foundation, and the I-5 Toyota Scholarships, among others.

Resiliency means planning — and Lewis County knows how to do it

By Rep. Peter Abbarno

20th Legislative District

Resiliency is more than a buzzword in Lewis County — it’s a way of life. From flooding in the Chehalis Basin to winter storms and economic

uncertainty, our community understands that true resiliency isn’t just about responding after disaster strikes. Resiliency means planning, investing wisely, and making decisions today that protect

families, businesses, and communities tomorrow.

Recent flooding in the Chehalis Basin underscores that reality. While meaningful progress has been made toward long-term flood mitigation, these events remind us that resiliency requires sustained effort and continued investment. As assistant ranking member of the House Capital Budget Committee, I have worked to secure funding for the Chehalis Basin Flood Authority to advance critical flood-mitigation projects. Over my five years in the Legislature, I’ve seen firsthand how planning



Peter Abbarno

and persistence can reduce risk and save lives — but the work is far from finished.

Resiliency also means planning for recovery before a disaster occurs. That’s why I have sponsored and supported legislation focused on disaster response and recovery. In 2025, I sponsored and passed House Bill 1990, which helps utilities manage and recover disaster-related emergency costs while protecting customers from sudden and unaffordable rate spikes. When storms or floods damage infrastructure, families should not be hit twice — first by the disaster, and then by their utility bills.

In 2024, I also cosponsored and passed House Bill 2020, creating a state-administered public infrastructure

assistance program to help local governments and tribes repair critical infrastructure damaged during declared disasters. Roads, bridges, water systems, and utilities are essential to economic recovery and public safety. Planning for their repair before disaster strikes is a core component of resilient communities.

Disaster resiliency and infrastructure resiliency are closely tied to energy resiliency. When flooding, freezing temperatures, or windstorms hit, reliable electricity becomes a matter of public safety. Heat, clean water, communications, medical care, and emergency response all depend on a stable power grid. Unfortunately, recent state energy policies have weakened grid reliability and reduced Washington’s resiliency.

In March 2024, the Northwest narrowly avoided rolling blackouts during a prolonged cold snap, with temperatures plunging into the teens statewide. I remember that moment vividly because I was on the House floor at 2:00 a.m. on March 5, fighting against the passage of HB 1589 — legislation that phased out natural gas, a reliable source of heat and energy, and banned it from new construction.

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What Is America's 250th?

By **Cynthia Mudge**

Chamber Executive Director

What Is America's 250th?

The year 2026 will mark 250 years since the founding of the United States, commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Known as America's 250th, this milestone is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for communities across the nation to come together with a shared purpose—reflecting on our past while building stronger, more connected communities for the future.

As we continue striving to

“form a more perfect union,” America's 250th invites communities of all sizes, capacities, and locations to participate in meaningful, locally driven celebrations that honor history, encourage civic pride, and inspire future generations.

Help Lewis County Celebrate America's 250th!

The Centralia-Chehalis Chamber of Commerce encourages all communities throughout Lewis County to consider how they would like to participate in America's 250th.

Participation can take

many forms:

- Rebranding an existing event
- Creating a new celebration or educational program
- Highlighting local history, culture, or civic engagement efforts

Chamber staff are available to help brainstorm ideas, coordinate efforts, and promote events countywide.

Contact: director@chamberway.com

Call: Cynthia at 360-748-8885

QR Code: Scan the QR code for more information

If you already have an event



SCAN ME

planned, simply complete the event submission form on the Chamber website. Your event will be added to the Chamber's main calendar at chamberway.com and included in a dedicated list of Lewis County 250 events on the Chamber website.

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.

“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.

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

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

Courtesy Photo

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



Centralia School District Levy - February 10, 2026

On February 10, 2026, voters will be asked to consider a replacement Educational Programs and Operations Levy (EP&O). This funding helps provide the kind of education that prepares students for the jobs of tomorrow.

Centralia School District is asking voters to consider a three year replacement levy at \$1.170 per \$1,000 of assessed value.

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The Chamber encourages citizens to make informed decisions and to vote!



SCAN ME

ABBARNO: From Page 1

At the same time, nearly 1,200 megawatts of reliable generating capacity are being removed from the regional grid as state anti-fossil fuel laws take full effect, with no dependable replacement. That's enough electricity to power more than 935,000 homes. More than 60 percent of that loss is tied to the TransAlta plant in Centralia.

While the Washington Democrat majority continues to eliminate energy options, electricity demand continues to rise due to electric vehicles and the push toward all-electric buildings. It should be evident that solar, wind, and

even our abundant hydro-electric power alone are not enough to meet current or future demand.

That's why recent news in Centralia matters. TransAlta announced it will convert its facility from coal to natural gas — a major step toward restoring energy resiliency. Additionally, the federal government issued an order keeping coal in the energy mix for the winter. What once appeared to be a permanent closure has become a second chance — preserving jobs, stabilizing the grid, supporting our community, and ensuring reliable power when it matters most. Resiliency means being

honest about risks, realistic about solutions, and proactive in planning. It means investing in flood mitigation, preparing for disaster recovery, and maintaining an energy system that works when we need it most. Lewis County has always been resilient. Our responsibility in Olympia is to match that resilience with policies that help our communities endure, adapt, and thrive — no matter what challenges lie ahead.

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

SAVE THE DATE!

The Chamber Annual Banquet is January 23, 2026. This event is always fun as we kick off the new year with friends, honors, and auctions. On behalf of the Chamber board and staff, we look forward to seeing all your smiling faces!

You can register now at ChamberWay.com — just click on the Events Tab and choose CC Annual Chamber Banquet.



Visit Tuscany!

Guests who book by March 31, 2026, can secure the trip for \$3,699, which includes airfare and related fees. The package features seven nights in Tuscany plus two additional travel days. Travelers may also add a two-night stay in Rome for an additional \$699. To learn more, visit Chamberway.com, click the Events tab, and select the Tuscany option—or call the Chamber at 360-748-8885.



Photos by CI Destinations

Visit the stunning Tuscany region of Italy!



BIZZ BUZZ DEADLINE: January 15 - Send 200 words (or less) to marketing@chamberway.com

See 360 Degrees With Blue Skies Drones!

As we kick off the new year, drones are capturing stunning perspectives and serving vital roles across the Pacific Northwest. From breathtaking aerial shots of snow-covered mountains and ski resorts to real-time flood assessments in low-lying areas, drones are proving their value in both adventure and emergency response. Now, with cutting-edge 360 drones, you can capture immersive content from every angle—perfect for tourism, marketing, and interactive experiences. Whether you need visuals for insurance, social media, or promotional campaigns, Blue Skies Drones offers rentals, training, and sales. Don't just watch from the ground—own the sky. We've got a drone for that!



January Clearance Sales are Happening Now at Centralia Outlets!

Kick off the new year with unbeatable savings and fresh style for the whole family. The January Clearance event is the perfect time to refresh your wardrobe with incredible deals on name-brand apparel, footwear, and accessories. Cozy up with new winter wear, sweaters, and PJs from Polo

Ralph Lauren, The Children's Place, Pendleton, and more. Discover the latest trends and everyday essentials at Lane Bryant, Aéropostale, DXL, and Chico's—everything you need to stay stylish all season long.

If your New Year's resolution is to get active, find the gear you've been looking for at New Balance, Nike, and Skechers. Planning winter adventures? Columbia and Eddie Bauer offer durable hiking and snow gear designed to keep you warm, dry, and ready for anything the PNW weather brings.

Enhance your home and self-care routine with Bath & Body Works' newest scents in soaps, lotions, and candles. Then complete any look with standout accessories from Coach and Kay Jewelers.

With incredible prices on the brands you love and an always-changing selection, you won't want to miss this event. When the Outlets have a sale, it's REALLY a sale! Visit centraliaoutlets.com for store details and follow us on social for updates.



Support Your Community Through Lewis County Footsteps of Hope!

Lewis County Footsteps of Hope supports local students with food, clothing, and essential care. Your monthly gift helps turn small steps into brighter futures.

360-520-4810

www.lcfootstepsofhope.org

Join a Local Support Group with NAMI!

NAMI Lewis County is a peer-led support organization for individuals and their families struggling with mental health conditions. Our office is located at 1641 Kresky Ave. Ste. 3 Centralia, WA 98531. Our Family Support Group meets on Mondays at 6 pm. This is for adults who have loved ones living with mental illness to find support with others that have similar situations. Join us the 20th of January from 7-8:30 pm for our quarterly community night. We will have a meal, a presentation, and our business meeting. Our resource for the night is from new journeys. Connections Support Group is open to anyone in the community and our groups are always free. All our meetings are hybrid so you can join online as well. Please reach out to us directly if you have any questions or want a link to the meetings. Our office number is 360.559.1363 and you can call or text and we will get back to you as soon as we can. Contact us by email at

WHAT'S THE BUZZ?



NamiLewisCountywa@gmail.com. Visit our websites to find additional information: NAMI.org, NAMIWA.org, or our local site NAMILC.org.



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that stress. From making an appointment, to pretesting, to Dr. Ferris examining your eyes, then selecting glasses, we can help you in Spanish.

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The Chronicle Cuts The Ribbon on Their New Location!

Finalizing a multi-month move, The Chronicle was able to celebrate their new building being open, which is located at 215 N. Pearl St, in Centralia!



The Chronicle Hosts Business After Hours!

Pictured is Chad and Coralee Taylor and their family smiling with Santa at the BAH!

UPCOMING CHAMBER EVENTS!

RIBBON CUTTINGS

The Cluttered Closet

Wednesday, January 7
Noon
529 N. Tower Ave., Centralia

Possibilities Women's Center

Monday, January 26

Noon
1219 Mellen, Centralia

Hip N Humble

Thursday, January 29

Noon
202 S. Tower, Centralia

EVENTS

District 20 Legislative Forum

Thursday, January 22

7:30 – 8:30 am

Zoom event

director@chamberway.com

Chamber Banquet

Friday, January 23

6 pm

Centralia College, TransAlta rooms

615 West Pear, Centralia

Business After Hours

February

Thursday, February 19

5 - 7 pm

Napavine High School

404 4th Avenue NE, Centralia

Napavine High School

Career & Technical Education

(CTE) Program.

This evening showcases their CTE programs.

Travel to Tuscany!

Deadline for Discount

March 31, 2026

Trip Departure: Oct. 20

SANTA PARADE WINNERS

Commercial

First Place: Alta Forest Products

Second Place: Place: Braun Northwest, Inc.

Third Place: Fred Meyer

Motorized

First Place: Lincoln Creek Lumber

Second Place: Kostic Tree Farm

Third Place: Lewis County Transit

Youth

First Place: Winlock Dance Center

Second Place: Southwest Washington Dance Center

Third Place: Grey Wolf Martial Arts

Musical

First Place: Chehalis School District

Second Place: Onalaska School District

Float

First Place: Centralia College

Second Place: The Murphy Family

Third Place: Morton Loggers' Jubilee

Animals:

First Place: Visiting Nurses

Second Place: Three Rivers Care

BEST OVERALL

St. Joseph's Catholic School!



My 2 Scents K9 Is Officially Open!

Owner Kristi Bridgman is pictured holding the celebratory ribbon! Also at the Ribbon Cutting was a huge collection of different local artisans! You can find My 2 Scents K9 at 585 Leonard Rd, in Onalaska!



Onalaska Welcomes Its Brand New Community Center!

Owner LaKeda and her family are pictured cutting the celebratory ribbon, accompanied by her community and fellow business owners! You can find Touched By One, Touched By All Community Center at 1753 SR-508, Onalaska. Right next to the local Post Office!



KMNT Country Leads The Parade

KMNT 104.3 Country Radio was the Grand Marshal for this year's parade – whose theme was "A Country Christmas." They were welcomed by the cheering and waving crowd lining the route.



Santa Parade

The Chehalis Fire Department escorts Santa during the 75th Annual Santa Parade. Crowds line the street, watching eagerly as multiple large vehicles pass by during the parade



Lincoln Creek Lumber



St. Joseph's Catholic School!

