



Season 2 - Episode 6 “Connecting New Jersey: Southern Edition”

Welcome to the sixth episode of Season 2 of the NJFPA Stradley Ronon Food Forum Podcast. In this episode, [Bill Cornelius](#), Senior Commercial Banker at [M&T Bank](#), speaks with [Christina Renna](#) President & CEO at the [Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey](#). They talk about CCSNJ’s work in Trenton, connecting business communities across regions and her forecasts for the food and beverage industry in South Jersey.

Guest Bio:



Christina Renna currently serves as President & CEO of the Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey. In this role, Ms. Renna oversees a nine person staff and has direct oversight of the Chamber’s work in public policy, membership growth, member retention and overall member experience. Ms. Renna joined the Chamber in 2007 and served as Director of Government Affairs through early 2010. She returned in 2014 as Vice President, then rose through the ranks as Senior Vice President before taking over the helm of the organization in January of 2020.

Ms. Renna’s past work experience also includes government affairs and communications work at South Jersey Industries and as a legislative aide to former- Assemblyman John C. Gibson of New Jersey’s First Legislative District.

In 2010, Ms. Renna was proud to be named as one of SJ Biz Magazine’s first-ever list of rising stars in the South Jersey business community. Additionally, in 2019, 2020 and 2021, Ms. Renna was listed on NJBIZ’s Power List as one of the most powerful people in New Jersey’s business community. In 2020 and 2021, she was also named to the ROI-NJ Influencers Power List of statewide association leaders, and in 2021 she was named to the first-ever ROI-NJ Women’s Power List among the top 50 most powerful women in business in New Jersey.

Listeners will hear:

- The benefits of association membership and the wide variety of programming they offer.
- CCSNJ's expertise in lobbying Trenton and what might change with the new Senate President.
- How connecting small and large businesses in the region together is a win-win for the NJ economy.
- What changes she has seen in the business landscape of the last few years - COVID, new businesses, the great resignation.
- The rising trend in the South Jersey food and beverage industry.
- How it is possible to get a degree both from St Joe's and Villanova.
- How Christina stays current on important issues in NJ.

Edited Interview Transcript

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 0:52

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the next episode of The Stradley Ronon. New Jersey Food Processors Association Food Forum. Let me introduce myself first. I'm your guest interviewer, Bill Cornelius. I'm a VP at M&T Bank, and I'll be the guest host for this episode of Food forum. I have, as well as M&T has been involved with the New Jersey food processors, probably for the last 15 years been on the board for the last two or three. We're proud supporters, participants, board members, as we think the New Jersey Food Processors Association does a great job in supporting the food community, professional associations like the NJFPA and other relationships foster important stages of business. So I'm glad to be here to talk to another New Jersey Business Leader. She is the CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of Southern New Jersey, that's always hard to pronounce. To me, it's always the Southern New Jersey Chamber of Commerce. But let's give a real good round of applause for their current president CEO Christina Renna.

Christina Renna 1:56

Thank you so much, Bill. I know it is a bit of a mouthful Chamber of Commerce, Southern New Jersey, we just say South Jersey Chamber to be quick.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 2:04

All right, we'll start making acronyms. Let's start out really at the beginning and tell us a little about the Chamber and work that it does. When it seems like there are just so many different organizations and chambers, you can join in your town, county, region, in your mind what stands out about the Chamber? And how do they complement other associations such as ours?

Christina Renna 2:27

Well, thank you so much, Bill, and everyone at the New Jersey Food Processors Association for having me today. It's really interesting, our chamber's history. I think I'll start there, because not many people know our history. Then we'll get into those comparisons that you just mentioned. So the South Jersey Chamber of Commerce was actually created 149 years ago, we are coming up on our 150th anniversary. We were created by Campbell Soup Company, and RCA Victor in the city of Camden as the Camden Board of Trade. So we are essentially the trade association for the city of Camden and all the businesses that existed in the late 1800s. Over time, we evolved to the Camden City Chamber of Commerce. Then somewhere along the line, I'm not quite sure when we became a regional business organization representing businesses of all shapes, sizes, and industry types from Burlington County down to Cape May County, so the seven most southern counties of New Jersey. Although our roots are in Camden City, we do our best to represent the interests of the region.

We see the South Jersey region as a little bit of a family, we have very unique issues that are very similar in a lot of ways and very different than our northern brethren. So we are constantly at the South Jersey Chamber fighting for what's best for the regional business community, whether you're a small mom and pop business, or you're a casino in Atlantic City. So those interests vary. But one thing we all have in common is that if all of these types of businesses are running on all cylinders, then our regional economy is going to be strong, there's going to be strong job growth, strong economic activity. That's really what we want to see out of the South Jersey Chamber of Commerce is all of our members succeed, whether they be small, medium, large, or a variety of industries. That's what sets us apart from other organizations.

The other part of your question was, why are we a regional Chamber of Commerce. There are so many associations, there are industry specific associations, like food processors, like NJFPA. Then there are local chambers of commerce, then there are county chambers of commerce, and there are regional chambers of commerce, and there are statewide businesses associations. I am not blind to the fact that it is probably crazy to anyone outside this world to think that none of us are connected. But we're all independent organizations. We don't all fall under one umbrella. We are all individual organizations, individual businesses, doing different things, all for very important purposes. But again, for varying purposes as well, your local Chamber of Commerce is going to be the person that's going to be at your ribbon cutting, promoting what's happening on your main street or in your community very specifically. Whereas your county chambers are going to be doing that more on a county level and working with your county commissioners on programs and whatever it may be that helps generate positive, give back to your county.

We as a regional Association care about that, just on a larger scale. Really what I think also sets us apart is because we're regional and we represent businesses throughout the seven most southern counties, you pay one membership fee, but you get members from all over. So if you are based in Cumberland County, but really want to connect with some community organizations in maybe an underrepresented community, like the city of Camden, or Gloucester City, or Burlington City, we have that all under one roof. You don't have to pay separate membership fees to be a member of this county chamber, this local chamber. We have relationships with all the mayors, all the county commissioners, and we get it all under one roof with our chamber. So I think that answers your question. I mean, I can go on forever and answer this question, Bill. But I think that sums it up as

neatly as possible.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 6:33

And it does. And I'll tell you what, I was remiss, as I was looking through your biography, you've done a lot, not just in South Jersey, you served in former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's administration, as well as Assemblyman John Gibson of the first district. So you've gotten to take a look at not just the southern seven counties, but also the entire state, which is impressive. So it gives you a better perspective to answer some of the questions that we'll have for a year. This one is, it's just self serving, right? Basically, I'm part of the New Jersey Food Processors. So, you know, what are some of the membership benefits in your organization that are a special interest to let's say, the New Jersey Food Processing community?

Christina Renna 7:18

Yes. One interesting thing about our Chamber of Commerce that is unique to most Chamber of Commerce, is that we have a lobbying room. We are a 501 C six organization, we are fully apolitical. We are a nonpartisan organization, we do have two staff lobbyists. I actually serve as the Chamber's chief lobbyist, my background is, for better for worse in politics. I'm happy to be out of that now. But still one foot in, one foot out at the South Jersey Chamber of Commerce. We also have a manager of Government Affairs, Hilary Chebra, who handles all the day to day lobbying activity in Trenton. Why does that make us unique from other Chambers of Commerce? Well, a lot of times people think of a Chamber of Commerce, and they just think, you know, business card exchanges, shaking hands, this person is trying to sell you copy paper, not there's anything wrong with that, or sell you insurance, not there's anything wrong with that. That's all part of what makes a Chamber of Commerce, a Chamber of Commerce, and we have all kinds of members.

We also have this really strong lobbying arm that is really proud over our tenure to have built very solid relationships with both sides of the aisle here in New Jersey, and actively weigh in in Trenton on any issue that impacts our member companies, or the South Jersey Regional Business community as a whole. So how does that help members of the New Jersey Food Processors Association? Well, many of the NJFPA members are going to probably be members or are very familiar with the New Jersey Food Council. The New Jersey Food Council works in tandem with our organization. I'm constantly in contact with Linda, with Mary Ellen. They're zoning in on those really hyper targeted issues, like plastic bags or recycled content that we've just been working on, food labeling. All of those types of issues we're engaged on, but we helped support the New Jersey Food Council in their lobbying efforts just to give an added voice and let them take the lead. They're the industry experts.

Where we come in and really thrive, for groups like food manufacturers, is that we're really heavily engaged on those more labor related issues. We were very engaged, for example, in the minimum wage play that happened over the past several years. We in South Jersey Chamber were very instrumental in getting, although we still have a \$15 minimum wage that impacts so many manufacturers' bottom lines is something that we were never supportive of, that was going to be phased in over a two or three year time frame. Although not ideal, we actively lobbied and were successful in getting that

stretched out over a five year time period, at least allowing our manufacturing companies, our larger businesses and of course, our smaller businesses that were impacted, better time to budget and manage those expectations and the fluctuation you're going to see across the board and all of your employees now salaries probably going off as a result. So labor issues, things like paid leave regulatory issues like dealing with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

So many manufacturers are working on the regulatory needs, whether it be air purification, site remediation, expansions of businesses, we get involved with all those state departments to help businesses navigate permitting, navigate whatever they need to get done to be in compliance, their business stay in compliance in the state of New Jersey. Then like I said, not just on that regulatory compliance side, but on the lobbying side really strong in labor issues, whether it be contracting legislation, paid family leave, equal pay, minimum wage, you name it. We're involved in really at the very top of that table. Then we have organizations like a Food Council that work in conjunction with us and follow our lead, even though we really handle more of those labor issues up front.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 11:18

Wow, wow, more than just networking. So if someone's watching this, you guys do a lot for the businesses, which are part of the chamber. To break a stereotype, because when I think of a chamber, I think of small businesses, but I think you guys as a chamber, you have, obviously small businesses, you probably have over 1000 members. But so the value proposition that you have, that basically runs the gamut of even the largest businesses here in South Jersey,

Christina Renna 11:51

Absolutely. So we have approximately 1100 members or somewhere between 1100-1200 members throughout the region. You don't have to be a business from South Jersey to be a member. That's something that's really unique, and helps, especially our manufacturing companies looking for maybe some networks outside of New Jersey, although we always like to keep that economic activity in South Jersey. We do have a wider network, we have about 80 to 85% of our businesses are considered small. So to your point, Bill, yes, predominantly small, but we also define small as 100 or less employees. A business with 100 employees isn't really small these days, maybe it used to be considered that, but not so much anymore.

In our membership, though, we have every casino, every major hospital system, most of the well known manufacturers, every institution of higher education in the South Jersey footprint, and beyond, all of our utility companies. I mean, you name it from a Subaru in Camden City to [unclear] down in Salem County, we run the gamut. Although the smaller business may be the majority of the membership, that 15 to 20% of our membership are those large businesses. Between the two, we always have our larger businesses or manufacturing companies saying I want to do business with small employers in my backyard, I want to help the little guys, I rather give my money to the little guys in my backyard than the little guys in California, we're here to help you identify those little guys, and then match you up, help you make those connections. So we can keep all that activity here in South Jersey, which is only going to help all of our businesses do better.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 13:40

All right, so the chamber almost acts like a bridge between business and government to an extent. So, from your perspective, what upcoming legislative issues do you think food processors should keep an eye on? And also what advice would you give food businesses to keep ahead of the changes? And should they develop relationships with their legislators?

Christina Renna 14:02

It's an interesting time right now. Obviously, if you're looking specifically to South Jersey, which I know, the NJFPA has members from across the state just like I do, there's quite a shake off this election cycle. So a lot of new faces, that a lot of us are dealing with a new senate president for the first time since 2010. That is not inconsequential to the end of the day. The legislative agenda is going to be set in the Senate by Senate President Nick Scutari now, where for many years it was Senate President Steve Sweeney. So what are his priorities versus Senate President Sweeney? Senate President Sweeney was more of a moderate senator, but really focused on these labor issues, those labor issues I was mentioning early on. He was a union iron worker, is a union iron worker. So those labor issues that really impacted business's bottom lines were first and foremost.

Senate President Scutari seems to have a real interest in insurance specifically, insurance issues, regulating insurers of all kinds, that's an aspect of business. That may speak to maybe giving us some breathing room on some of these labor issues that really, again, add costs. Also, I think we need to keep an eye on what's happening with independent contractors, so many food processors use independent contractors for any variety of reasons. There has been a push, and this is a national push. We've seen it happen in California, to make these independent contractors that so many businesses, use and contract with and contract with fairly to not necessarily, have them on the payroll but have utilized them as vendors to make them a part of your employee base. This was a big issue for former Senate President Steve Sweeney, with his absence where will this go? This all leads back to the desire to unionize employees. That was a big priority to the former Senate President. Is that something that we're going to see happen in New Jersey? Potentially. California did pass it and as we know, Governor Murphy is not shy about saying that he wishes New Jersey was the California of the East Coast. So again, something that we need to keep an eye on, because should independent contractor laws change, it's going to change how food processors go about deciding upon vendors, hiring vendors, and whether or not they actually have to make them essentially employees or not.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 16:27

So we're in January 22, we've gotten through the year, we ended it, COVID still here, supply chain shortages still exist, labor shortages still exist. Is it too early to get a feel for your membership base and just what the temperature is out there? Do they feel like some of these most of these, we'll get through this year? We had internally at M&T, we had a chat with our economic folks and the consensus is all those three items: COVID labor shortage, supply chain shortage will continue to exist in the short term they defined as six months or so. Is there any

consensus of your base of how they feel about this year?

Christina Renna 17:12

So I would agree with what you heard, what we're hearing from economists we talk to regularly at the South Jersey Chamber is six to nine months to your point about supply chain labor shortage, the impacts of COVID are obviously going to continue. We were pleased to see in the fourth quarter of last year, an uptick in economic activity, not abnormal, given the holiday season. But we were pleased to see that these constraints we're seeing with supply chain labor shortages, didn't seem to impact the South Jersey regional economy, too, too much. Generally speaking, what our economists and we work directly with the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, on a South Jersey Business Survey that assesses exactly what we're seeing in our region and that was some good news. Inevitably, almost always, q1 of the next year, we see a drop, and with especially starting the year with this new COVID variant, and what that did, keeping people sometimes a little bit more grounded over the past two, three weeks. What will that do to getting the ball rolling in the new year?

I will say all that aside, I do think people are somewhat optimistic. I feel like from talking to our member companies, they feel like they've been through hell, in one way or the other. Don't get me wrong, there have been businesses that have actually thrived during the pandemic, given their industry or their ability to really think creatively and pivot their business model in a way that kept them relevant. Just as many businesses struggled, and people are feeling optimistic, and it's all about this mindset, I think that people are starting to believe that COVID maybe isn't going anywhere. We just need to continue to carry on just move forward. The supply chain issues, these labor shortage issues, we hope will dwindle in a six to nine month period and we can get back to business knowing and understanding now the pandemic is something we're going to have to probably live with as a reality.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 19:21

That's unfortunate. You're talking to a vaccinated, boosted, infected guy. So that means I'm bulletproof for '22. So this is an odd question, but based upon what we've seen with a decent amount of resignation in the corporate world, when these folks go home, start their own businesses. Does that represent an opportunity for the chamber, now as you have these people leaving the workforce creating their own business? I would think the only, not the only way, but networking traditionally, was a way for that small shop, really to get their name out there. Does that represent opportunity? And two, now that I think about it for the chamber, what's your expectation? You have some in person meetings now I know and, and events, and you can only go as COVID tracks. But are you looking towards the end of the year to get more in person events rather than virtual?

Christina Renna 20:19

Well, I'll tell you what, Bill. I just had my second in person event of the year this morning before we recorded this, we had an event with Congressman Donald Norcross of the first congressional district in the city of Camden at the Hilton Garden Inn there. We have a full

slate of programming planned, that is upwards of 130 in person events planned between now and the end of the year. This month, specifically, we had to switch and flip some of those programs to virtual but we still have four in person events this month. We ended up having to six virtual events or which are our networking events, and one is actually with New Jersey Food Processors Association on January 31. Our entire model at this point is one that can easily shift to virtual should we need to do so. But we are completely planning to be in person. Our programming, as I sort of alluded to at the very beginning, because we're regional. We don't just have diversity in our geographic locations of our events. So we make sure we do events in Atlanta County, we're in Salem County or around Gloucester, and we'll be up in Burlington, we're all over.

Every one of those meetings in person allow you to meet a different contingency of business people, because people will come to what's maybe in their backyard, they're traveling to Cumberland County, if you're from Camden County, is not always a bad idea. We also have a lot of diversity in programming. Do you just want to network, do you just want to get your brand out? To your point Bill, in 2020, a year where you would think we would have a hard time attracting members, we still attracted 174 new members. Now in a normal year, we would have somewhere between 220 and 240. So the reason why we had 174 new members, which I call a win given the state was shut down for several months, and people were not looking to maybe necessarily invest in an association like ours. People were furloughed, people were laid off, people started their own thing. We saw an emergence of people starting their own businesses and emergence of people starting their own nonprofits, something they're passionate about, that has been a passion project, or that they've cared about tremendously. So we have these smaller organizations joining the chamber, when they were hit with the pandemic maybe laid off. That was really interesting and allowed us in our programming to do some very special things for those members. But that's not what's going to interest New Jersey Food Processors Association members.

So when you look at an organization like ours, it's picking your spots. We may have, like this month, eight or nine different events, but of those, probably only one will be of value to members of the New Jersey Food Processors Association. So you pick your spots, and you know, you're spending time at the right type of event where you're looking to connect with the right person, and relying on our team who are very proactive and saying like, stay away from those events or go to these events. Then your money is going to be well spent. Because if you walk out of that hour and a half long event you need to solid business people or community partners that you want to do business with, link your employee base up with, maybe to do some interesting things to give back to your community, or whatever it may be, then that \$25 cost of the ticket to enter the event was well worth it. Again, we are planning fully in person, we are able to flip the virtual we need to, but we are full steam ahead. Again, understanding that the pandemic isn't going anywhere, we don't really want to be restrained as a result. And should we need to require masking or whatever happens, then we're always there for the health and safety of our members. Knock on wood we haven't had any incidents over the past two years with any of our events. So we hope that continues.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 24:18

We're the same. So I'll give a shameless plug on March 18, is our annual conference down at Harrah's Atlantic City. So we're keeping our fingers crossed, that all goes well for that. But we're

looking forward to that. So what other information would you want to give the audience here about the chamber? Maybe we've covered everything? I don't know. But is there anything else you want to tell more about the chamber, I can tell you, just as I've been a member of the New Jersey Food Processors Association, for just as long I've been a member of the Southern New Jersey Chamber, and you guys say what you do and do what you say, when you go to a networking event one of things that I like, is basically you'll give the attendance the day before. So for some who basically don't have a lot of time can go through that. Unfortunately, maybe they say, Hey, listen for this one. You know, I don't see anyone that is there. But I can tell you personally, I've been there a couple times where I picked off a couple people. And I say Hey, can you introduce me to so and so? The Chamber's always been gracious in doing so. So I once thought that chambers were in danger, they may be but I don't think the southern New Jersey Chamber is in danger, I think it's rock solid. I don't know if there's any other info you want to give Christine about the Chamber before we learned some stuff more about you personally.

Christina Renna 25:40

Okay. Listen, I love talking about the Chamber, I could talk about the chamber all day. I agree that a Chamber of Commerce is sort of an antiquated term. I always say ask a 20 year old when a Chamber of Commerce is, ask a 40 year old, most don't know. The model may be antiquated, but we're really pleased that I mentioned 2020 the Year pandemic hit, we've attracted 174 new members. Last year, we recruited 224 new members, businesses of all shapes and sizes to our membership. We only are looking at an attrition rate of about somewhere around 10%. So we're growing, and we're growing and businesses of all sizes are interested in joining our organization. Because we're not a traditional Chamber of Commerce, we don't believe in the mantra that you get out what you put in as a member. Of course, that's true in anything in life. But we see it as our role and responsibility to be proactive with people that join our organization.

So I have members that join simply to get their brand out, get their name out, network, they want that business card exchange, they want to shake hands, they want to get their face seen and known and recognized. Then I had members that purely joined because of the work we do on public policy, those legislative issues I rattled off, or needing help getting in front of their local senators. We help arrange those meetings, we have those contacts, or I have members that just want to be a part of the South Jersey community, want to give back, want to know what our nonprofit community is doing. We have almost 150 nonprofits in our chamber, something we're really proud of. We don't just see ourselves as being business first, we see ourselves being business and community first. Which does set us apart. But to the point of, you get out what you put in. I think it's our responsibility as members of the South Jersey Chamber team. No one knows our organization better.

So often people pay a membership fee, join a chamber, go to an event, don't meet anyone, say this is a waste of money, and that's it. As soon as you join, we sit down and we have an onboarding meeting with you. What are your goals? Is it public policy? Is it help with your HR issues, we are an [unclear] provider, we can help your HR people get professional development credits and help you learn about how to manage the vaccine in the workplace, leave laws in the workplace. How to lay off, if you need to, responsibly, whatever it is. Then we tell you, we actually put a roadmap together. It's a form that every new member gets that says stay away from these events, go to these events, give us your top five type members you want to meet. That stays on our radar, we have a

database where we're constantly comparing, oh, this new member wants to meet this person and this person is registered for the event next Wednesday, let's shoot him an email and let them know to register for that event. We are extremely hands on. So we feel it's our responsibility to make sure you are maximizing the membership because no one knows our chamber better than us, the team at the chamber. So that really does set us apart. I think that is why we're seeing the growth because the new members that join see that we really care and we're really hands on with helping new members feel welcome and a part of a family.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 29:03

Another thing which I've seen over the years is the chamber is very inclusive, whereas you support the sub chambers, Gloucester County Chamber, Camden County Chamber, which there's no pride of authorship there, which is nice, which you do your best also support, I would call them fledgling, and you've done a good job in supporting them. One of the food questions on this I just want to ask before we get my favorite part when you tell us about your golf handicap. But South Jersey has been a region with a pretty big presence in food. We look what you have in Cumberland County, with the processors also, there's a good bit of that in [unclear] in Gloucester County, but over the years, what changes have your members seen? And are they general trends that you've seen over the past five or 10 years as New Jersey, South Jersey has been attracting some of these nice size companies?

Christina Renna 29:57

It's really interesting to watch the trends, really over the past 30 years, I'll say. South Jersey's base was manufacturing. If you look at the late 80s, early 90s, mid 90s, we were manufacturing strong. We were refinery strong in that Paulsboro area where then it was Mobil Oil. Now that's the Paulsboro refinery but that was really our bread and butter in South Jersey manufacturing, food manufacturing. As a Vineland born and raised girl we're very proud of our roots in the food manufacturing history. You started to slowly see those dwindle especially once you hit the mid 90s and then into the late 90s. With that dip, what we saw was the emergence of some other industries which is always great, but obviously not great for food manufacturers. When Rutgers Food Innovation Centers decided to come to Bridgeton, and people really started to open their eyes and say, Hey, South Jersey, has the space. Taxes are lower, people can drive, there's not as much congestion, what a great place to raise a family. So if you buy a house, and I can attract employees there, because the property taxes are lower there, whatever it is, we started to see an uptick again. Again, I want to give credit where credit's due, I do think the Rutgers Food Innovation Center has a big part of that.

But also, people giving South Jersey a really hard look, which stopped throughout the late 90s, early 2000s, mid 2000s. It was just, south jerseys over here, which we're always forgotten about in Trenton. That's a big reason why we are so loud in Trenton at the South Jersey Chamber. We're starting to see that come back and now we officially have come back and people from across the state look at me and say your food manufacturing is through the roof. That's where I need to open a distribution center. That's where I need to even open some sort of satellite office to be able to tap into those resources down there. Those were not conversations that were happening, I would say, six or seven years ago, which have definitely been happening, even during the course of the pandemic. As

people are looking to lower costs but want to stay in the state of New Jersey, not only South Jersey the most affordable place to go, it's actually the only place left to go in many cases. We're getting hard looks, those trends we saw in the dip food manufacturing in the 90s. We're starting to see that resurgence. And now I think it's fair to say we certainly have. We just keep growing and that's exactly the trends we want to be seeing Bill.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 32:35

All right. Well, you let the cat out of the bag. So you're a South Jersey girl. Tell us a little bit more about Christina Renna.

Christina Renna 32:44

Oh, geez. Well, okay, so I said I was born and raised in Vineland, that's not actually true. I was born in Atlantic City and I lived in Ocean City until I was four. So I lived in Cape May County until I was four but my whole family is from the Vineland and Millville area. So my parents relocated us back to Vineland when I was four. I went to Vineland High School and graduated from Vineland High School. Some of you listening may know my maiden name is Genovese. My mother was a very well known teacher actually at Vineland High. She taught at Vineland High School for over 20 years and was probably one of the most popular teachers there through the 80s and 90s, into the early 2000s Lois Genovese. So my family is from the Vineland-Millville area, my father still lives in Louisville to this day. Now I live up in Mount Laurel, which back when I lived in Vineland, I used to consider North Jersey. I used to call literally Mount Laurel, North Jersey. I had a friend that lived up here and I would call it going up north for the night, when I lived in Vineland. I'm very well aware of, I talk a lot about South Jersey being a family. But I also know that there's a big difference between Cumberland County and Camden County, I lived in both. So that's a little bit about my background. I went to St. Joe's University for my undergrad in political science, got my master's degree from Villanova University, then have worked in and around politics for the majority of my career. I came to the chamber in 2007, as our staff lobbyist, stayed until 2010. Then, as you mentioned early on, I work in the Christie administration from 2010 until 2014, after which I came back to the chamber and I've been back to the chamber ever since and took over as president and CEO right before the pandemic hit in January of 2020.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 34:31

So this may not resonate with everybody. But you said undergrad, St. Joe's MBA, Villanova???

Christina Renna 34:39

I swear I have team loyalty. I swear I'm not a traitor. [Yeah, you can't] I know. I know how it sounds. I know how it sounds. Unfortunately, St. Joe's didn't have the strong public administration program that I was looking for. I wanted to stay up in the area and my dad who lives in Melville Tom Genovese, he's a Villanova alum. He was crushed when I went to St. Joe's to begin with, so I threw him a bone, even though I got into Rutgers and it

was a quarter of the cost and I was paying for it myself. I still went to Villanova. My dad to this day just goes around and tells everyone I graduated from Villanova and acts like I didn't even go to St. Joe's. But I do want to make it clear that I'm a very loyal person and I know I sound like a traitor.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 35:26

No, no, no, no. It's just getting an undergrad at St. Joe's and MBA at Villanova, it's an oxymoron. I'm just trying to process it. Okay, well, nevertheless, definitely, you have to be considered a high level center of influence in this part of the world. So what does a person like you, where do you get your industry news from? What do you listen to? What do you read?

Christina Renna 35:50

On a New Jersey scale, I am very, very big into keeping tabs on an online publication called ROI New Jersey. If you're not familiar with it, I encourage everyone to go to their website, just <https://www.roi-nj.com/>. Sign up for their newsletters. Going back to when I started at the Chamber in 2007. All that was out there for business news locally was [NJBIZ online](#) for the most part, and then their print publications were what came in the mail once a week. Now everything's online for the most part. No disrespect to NJBIZ, but they do not cover South Jersey. It's been an ongoing issue and I've had conversations with their editors and whatnot, saying, you really need to cover the whole state, there's a lot happening here in South Jersey. ROI New Jersey recognizes that and they have morning, afternoon and evening newsletters daily, they have print versions as well.

If you want to know what's happening, and have a pulse on New Jersey's business community, you can sign up for different industry newsletters and whatever. They do a great job of covering what's happening here in South Jersey, to the point of contacting me and reaching out and saying like we're getting ready to put our top 100 most influential business people on this list, who am I missing from South Jersey. Other publications never even thought to reach out and care about who's in South Jersey. So I look into my membership base. I'm like who are the companies that are doing really big exciting things this year, and I help give some recommendations. They take some, they don't take others that's obviously up to them. But I make the argument why at least half that list should be from South Jersey, whether it be a Women in Business list, real estate list, health care list, whatever it is. That proactive nature is what I love about ROI New Jersey, so ROI New Jersey on a local or a statewide level for sure.

Here in South Jersey, I always glance at [South Jersey Magazine](#) and [SJ Biz Magazine](#), keep an eye on what's happening again in the region. More and more, national scale, I'm always keeping an eye on what Forbes is reporting on. That's just always interesting to see what the latest news is. I think it's generally unbiased, it's just real true business news and that's really what I track the most. The other thing I will say is, I'm a big reader. I like turning pages. I don't like to read books on tablets, I like to read newspapers and hold them.

I still get [The Press of Atlantic City](#), even though I live in Mount Laurel now. They're one of the few in New Jersey locally owned, not bought up by a conglomerate like USA Today, that reports on local news. Of course, it's hyper specific to Cape May and Atlantic

counties, they do tackle important issues that impact the entire region. I love that they are locally owned and still reporting on those hyperlocal issues that other outlets like The Daily Journal and The Vineland Millville area where I grew up, that's now owned by USA Today. So that's getting away from that. I love keeping a pulse on what's happening right in my backyard. So I read the press of Atlantic City pretty regularly as well.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 39:06

Alright, interesting it's interesting to find a little bit more about the chamber even though I thought I knew everything they did. And it's always nice to get to know you a little bit better.

Christina Renna 39:10

Full of surprises Bill, aren't we full of surprises at the South Jersey chamber?

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 38:15

We are! I mean, I was surprised today. But again, thank you for your time this morning and have a great afternoon.

Christina Renna 39:17

All right. Bill, thank you so much. And thank you again to the New Jersey Food Processors Association. Great organization love being affiliated with you and love working with you and look forward to doing some more in 2022.

Bill Cornelius, M&T Bank 39:40

Thank you

On behalf of the New Jersey Food Processors Association. We thank you for listening to this episode of the NJFPA Food Forum. For more information, you can visit us at www.njfoodprocessors.org. If you have an idea for a future episode, please email us at help@njfoodprocessors.org. We would love to connect with you and make your story and your experience part of this series too.