

SECOND CHAMBER THRIVES WESTON BUSINESS UNIT NETS 200 MEMBERS IN ITS INAUGURAL YEAR

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Just over a year after the birth of a new chamber of commerce in the Weston area, leaders and members are hailing the organization as having more than succeeded.

“We have exceeded our goals for the year in terms of membership and growth,” proclaimed Dick Trimarche, chair of the Weston Business Chamber of Commerce. “Since there are two chambers in Weston, it is remarkable that we gained 200 members in the first year.”

“The feed back from our members has been very positive,” said Tom Cameron, the chamber’s first vice chair who describes himself as the “unofficial founder” of the organization. “We have a participation type organization and people feel that it is their chamber.”

The new chamber began a year ago this past April and has proven to be very active, offering networking opportunities and a number of seminars designed to serve the people of the community.

“The chamber has energized the business community,” asserted Keil Hackley, one of the chamber’s founding directors and co-chair of the international committee. “I think that we have also done a good job of establishing allied partnerships with important institutions in south Florida, including some of the Latin chambers.”

Hackley’s committee has made a concerted effort to involve Weston’s large Latin American community as members and to provide resources to that segment of the population.

“Our international seminars have been well attended,” Hackley said. “Especially our most recent event that focused on the topic ‘I am here, now what?’”

“We wanted to provide the business community with real life experiences and experts who could share their stories,” she explained. “We have found that many in the immigrant community are interested in U.S. taxation issues, so we have tried to help them understand them.”

Hackley said that chamber members represent a diversity of not only nationalities but also occupations. “Our events are held in Weston, but they are open to whoever wants to come,” she said.

Trimarche said that the chamber counts a varied membership list, from small shop owners to professional executives of large corporations such as the Cleveland Clinic. “Our members represent personal services, restaurants, business brokers and contractors as well as professionals such as bankers, lawyers and corporate executives,” he said.

That spread is what attracted Patricia Gutierrez and her husband Ray who recently opened a Kinkos outlet at 1548 Weston Road in Weston.

“We saw the benefits of meeting people,” she said. “This chamber has a lot of influential people in it and that was a key factor in our decision to join.”

Gutierrez, who lives in Miami Lakes, and serves as the store’s Senior Customer Consultant, said that she attends all of the networking events. “We have been well received and get a lot of good leads,” she said.

Another new member of the chamber is Kathi Barnhart who will be the manager of a Comerica Bank branch scheduled to open at 2800 Weston Road in the Millenium Plaza in Weston on July 1.

“The purpose of a chamber is to build referral sources,” Barnhart said. “This chamber has offered a lot for professional members who we want to serve.”

Barnhart, who lives in Weston, said that she has been pleased with the help that the chamber has given her related to a ribbon cutting that they are helping to sponsor on July 1.

Many members have indicated their pleasure with the new chamber’s governing style and the participation of many people in decision making. “The governance is very broad,” said Roy Oppenheim who is the president of a law firm and title company in Weston. “Many people are involved in the process of governing which is as important as the chamber itself.”

Oppenheim added that the new chamber has been “a rational voice of the business community in front of the city government representing business issues.” He said that the chamber has brought issues such as a sign ordinance and policies regarding how late nightclubs can stay open for discussion by city government officials.

Comparing the new Weston Business Chamber of Commerce to the venerable Weston Area Chamber of Commerce, Oppenheim said that the new chamber involves more professional people and this provides a better venue for his legal firm to make contacts and develop new business.

“Our law firm withdrew from the old chamber because we felt that the new chamber has a higher pitch and a more sophisticated clientele,” he said. “But, our title firm remains a member of the older chamber because there are more independent contractors and sales people there such as realtors and mortgage brokers who are the type of people our title firm is trying to contact.”

The new chamber executives are not willing to bask in the success of their first year. “We have done very well, we have grown beyond our expectations and have done more than

we expected,” said Todd Templin who handles public relations for the organization. “The challenge is to outdo the first year.”

“We have put together a strategy to build membership,” Tremarche said. “We have a brochure and some mail-out material. We have tapped into a list of new businesses.”

Trimarche said that the organization is contracting with part and full-time sales people to market the chamber and attract new members.

Oppenheim said that the chamber wants to reach a membership of 300 to 350 members in the next year.

The chamber has entered discussion with other chambers in the area, including the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce, to explore ways in which these groups can cooperate in programming and share common expenses.

“We want to cooperate in alliances, but only if we can maintain our individuality,” Trimarche said. “There may be some ways that we can share expenses on common functions.”

On the programming front, the chamber is exploring ways to offer more activities and resources. “We want to cooperate with other chambers to develop programs that will benefit everyone,” Hackley said. “We want to make our community more integrated and to bring people together.”

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