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New Naperville Chamber Chief full of energy

By Jill Jedlowski

She might be petite in size, but the new leader of the Naperville chamber board is big on drive and ambition.

Debra Lellbach took over as chairwoman of the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce's board of directors last month, succeeding Steve Frost. The 53 year-old Naperville resident and business owner said she's ready and willing to lead the group through what is poised to be a pivotal year.

With more than 2,000 members, the chamber is the second largest in the state next to Chicago's. The board has 25 members, who are elected by the general membership. They act as ambassadors while setting policies that will benefit the business community.

It's a large task, but one for which Lellbach has studied.

Preparations included seeking advice from former leaders and also "filling some holes" in her knowledge base. For example, she set out to learn more about how the chamber's legislative committee operates. She said she hopes it will give her a political leg-up, especially during the group's lobby day next week in Springfield.

"I've gotten over being intimidated or self-conscious," Lellbach said. "I'm comfortable that I can do a good job, and I'm equipped for it."

Her chief goal is to help create and implement the organization's 2020 Strategic Plan. Other plans include wrapping up the transition period into the chamber's new membership model as well as continuing to oversee the restructuring of the board, which has involved splitting it into teams focused on various issues.

Mike Skarr, executive director and CEO, said the chamber is in good capable hands.

I think she is the best-prepared chairperson I've had in my tenure here: since 1996, Skarr said. "She understands what the chamber is all about from both the membership level and the board level. She brings a lot of credibility and integrity."

Two years ago, Lellbach made a career change after selling the Extra Closet storage business she and her father developed. Since then she joined her husband, Doug, on the job and now the two jointly own Warrenville-based Lellbach Builders, a home renovation company that began in 1988. Lellbach oversees the marketing and said her attention to detail lends itself to providing interior design advice to customers.

One of her strong suits, she said, is that she started like most members do. She's a business owner first, chamber leader second.

"If a member has questions or concerns, I can understand where they're coming from," Lellbach said.

In addition, Lellbach, participates in the chamber's small business group and its annual business makeover program.

The chairman position is a one-year job. Lellbach's term as a board member is longer and will expire in December 2008.