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NAPERVILLE CHAMBER RAMPS UP FOR THE FUTURE

Chamber, local businesses look to the future

By Meg Dedolph

When Office Max announced its plans to move its headquarters to Naperville, it was a sign of things to come, because the office supplies business chose to repurpose and old building rather than build a new one from the ground up.

That may become the future of area business development, said Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Mike Skarr. The city and DuPage County are facing build out, or the point at which there are no more large tracts of land available for major construction projects.

“Once you’ve built out and there’s no remaining land available, you can’t attract new industries primarily because you don’t have the destination,” he said. “We’re going to go from a high-growth business environment to a stable, maturing environment.”

As the area’s business geography changes, the chamber of commerce may have to change to accommodate its members, Skarr said.

Long-range review

To that end, the business advocacy group is rewriting its long-range plan, using focus groups and a hired consultant, intended to make sure the organization doesn’t slide into obsolescence in the face of changing business and demographic patterns.

The process should look familiar to most business owners, said the chamber’s new board president Debra Lellbach, of Lellbach Builders in Warrenville.

“Like any business, if you don’t plan and look to the future, you’re not going to grow and you’re not going to sustain yourself,” she said.

An updated long-range plan has other benefits to the chamber, Skarr said.

The last time the organization reviewed its plans was in 1995, shortly before Skarr started working for the group.

The fact the chamber had a clear idea of what it wanted to be, and that it was looking for someone to help put a specific plan into action appealed to Skarr, and he expects it will appeal to future chamber executives.

“There’s an importance for a clear set of expectations,” he said. “It really helps you attract and mobilize good leadership.”

Done in a few months

At the end of the process, expected to conclude this summer, when the chamber board approves its new plan, it will have a roadmap for its own growth and a comparison of its services and performance to other chambers nationally.

The plan will help the chamber decide what types of programs and services to offer its members, how much time to spend lobbying government on business issues and what type of a role it should play in the region’s economic development, Skarr said.



Global forces at play

Business owners will have more big-picture issues to deal with in the next several years, Lellbach said.

Customers shop online, turning a local marketplace into a global one, she said.

Furthermore, Lellbach, who works for a home renovation business, realized recently that as businesses become more international, so could her Naperville-area client base.

“I used to think globalization didn’t really affect me or our business, she said. “But I think globalization is a way to connect with people. The more I make myself accessible to them, the more successful we’re going to be.”

While it took an afternoon at a seminar for her to come to that understanding about her own work, she said it’s the chamber’s job to help its members understand the business climate.

“How can we help them grow and understand – that’s the challenge,” she said. “A lot of our members are so busy just doing their jobs, making ends meet, that our role is to help them grow further and show them what’s coming, so they can sustain themselves in the future.”