

## Chamber Retention Program Starts With Interviews

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Pinpointing concerns held by businesses is an essential element of a new program launched by the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce. The program's goal is then to put businesses in touch with resources that can address those concerns.

The chamber's economic development arm, the Committee of One Hundred is running the Local Business Retention and Expansion Program. It was set up to learn about and help solve issues that may be hindering a company's ability to grow or compete in the marketplace.

Myron Hughes, VP of economic development with the committee, said the chamber's lack of a formal retention program inspired him to start the initiative shortly after he arrived last October. Hughes said that without such a resource, many businesses that are experiencing difficulties may be inclined to move their operations elsewhere.

In order to document those concerns, about 30 volunteers – all of which are chamber members – will conduct interviews through December with 300 local businesses in the manufacturing/distribution, biomed/life sciences, financial/information services, international commerce and maritime industries. Those areas are also the same ones identified by Enterprise Florida, a statewide economic development group, as driving the state's overall growth.

### COUNTIES TAKING CONTROL

Enterprise Florida has recently been encouraging counties to implement retention programs, said Donna Harak, senior project manager for the committee.

In order to develop the chamber's program, Harak first had to identify companies in those key sectors. Harak, who estimates there are about 35,000 businesses in Hillsborough County, went to industry specific meetings and worked with state and local business organizations to come up with a list of 1,000 names, less than 200 of which were already chamber members.

That list was then reduced to 300 as a workable starting point for the survey. For the first round of interviews, which began April 15, about 100 companies are being surveyed, most of which are not affiliated with the chamber. The first committee meeting to discuss the results of the interviews will be held May 24. But already, Harak knows that not every attempt to conduct an interview has been successful.

Because some companies are dealing with quarterly financials, they are unable to take part in the survey until June. Others are more leery, perhaps suspecting an ulterior motive on the part of the chamber, Harak said.

But Harak made a point of weeding out chamber members in order to show that this project is intended to have a wide benefit, adding that it's "crucial to the economic success of the community" that the chamber is aware of issues affecting local companies.

After Harak sees the information captured on the survey and learns of a company's specific needs, she intends to call local resources – including tech schools, the work force alliance, planning offices or even the fire marshal – in order to facilitate a solution. She said she will also make a point of

following up with the company in order to determine if its needs were met or at least addressed to its satisfaction.

Thus far, at least two local businesses have benefited from the chamber's assistance. "We have a need for a trained, skilled workforce that doesn't exist in the market today. That's one of our biggest obstacles to success," said Michael MacInnes, treasurer with Tampa Armature Works Inc., which sells and services electrical equipment. Harak put the company in contact with the Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance, Learey Technical Center, which is a local coordinator for the Quick Response Training grant and curriculum development, and Workforce Florida, which has incumbent worker training programs. MacInnes said the contacts have "absolutely" helped the business.

## A NEW HOUSE OF GLASS

Westshore Glass, which is housed in a 100,000 square-foot building at 5300 W. Knox St., has been looking to move operations. Todd Elezory, COO, said he had been working with a Realtor who was sending information that was "way off the mark" from the company's needs.

Harak "brought me several properties she knew were available that would fill those needs," Elezory said. "She did the filtering for me." As a result of the assistance, Westshore Glass is pursuing one possibility.

The chamber also aided Westshore Glass' desire to see whether it could mitigate nearby wetlands by connecting it quickly with the Environmental Protection Commission.

"If I had tried to arrange that meeting with the EPC, I would have been looking at weeks, maybe months," Elezory said. Even though the EPC turned down the company's request, Elezory said he was happy to have the issue put to rest and appreciated the chamber's intervention. "Over the last few weeks, they have facilitated meetings that I thought would take months to get into," Elezory said. "They know the contacts you need to talk to."

Harak is also working on bringing those contacts into quarterly chamber roundtables that would include commissioners, work force and utility companies, and businesses that have been surveyed. Those businesses may also get an audience with Mayor Pam Iorio. The mayor has told the chamber she wants to support the retention program by holding meetings at her office once every six weeks with surveyed companies, Harak said.