

South Carolina Chamber of Commerce leads effort to build greater business clout in Columbia

Earlier this month, I attended the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce's "2006 Coastal Grassroots Network Regional Meeting." Held at the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce's headquarters, the meeting was billed as an "open forum allowing business leaders to voice their issues and concerns regarding the state's business climate."



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The meeting was well attended by area business people and staff from the state chamber and local chambers in our coastal region. State Sens. Glenn McConnell and Chip Campsen were present and offered helpful comments at the close of the meeting in response to the discussions during the forum.

In the first part of the meeting, S.C. Chamber executives discussed the chamber's legislative agenda for the 2006 legislative session, concluded earlier this year. As might be expected, there were some wins and some losses, but perhaps the most important message was that business, led by the S.C. Chamber, was "in the game" and actively working to influence policy-making in Columbia.

The second part of the meeting, led by the Charleston Metro Chamber's Mary Graham, was the open forum, just as advertised. There were lots of thoughtful comments and recommendations from the audience, ranging across a wide variety of topics, including education, taxes, infrastructure, health care, workers' compensation coverage and regulatory and environmental issues.

Getting in the race

S.C. Chamber President and CEO Hunter Howard stressed the need for business people to become more engaged in supporting legislative candidates in local races around the state, saying: "We need to be a player for

those who have supported business."

He added that, at the state level, the business community needs to present a unified voice in Columbia as well as strengthen local grassroots connections with legislators in our respective regions around the state.

The stepped-up efforts of the S.C. Chamber, in collaboration with local chambers around the state, are good news for South Carolina as well as for business. In the past, state legislators too often have paid scant attention to issues deemed important by the business community because business interests seemed to have little impact on who wins and who loses in races for seats in the General Assembly.

In my view, our state and local chambers of commerce almost always have taken carefully reasoned positions on public policy issues that represent the consensus views of their membership. And because we as business people both live and work in our local communities, we tend to support policies that are good for the citizens of our communities and not purely for narrow business interests.

Seeking a common voice for business

I believe that the S.C. Chamber's grassroots meetings are an important part of an emerging new infrastructure, every bit as important to our state as roads and bridges. Some components of this infrastructure will be based on "social capital," the increasing communication and collaboration between state and local chambers. Others will involve serious financial commitments to support candidates willing to step up to the plate and take action on public policy initiatives supported by the business community.

Other components embrace technology and knowledge: Web- and e-mail-based communications and information systems are already helping state and local chambers reach members in a timely manner and spur them to action when their participation is needed. The "knowledge" part is really political know-how, the pure nuts and bolts expertise required to organize the state's business community and give us the tools and knowledge to work together for the common good.

A different kind of venue

Sens. Campsen and McConnell made several important points, stressing that the legislative process can take on a momentum of its own, as happened with property tax reform in the last session. At such times, it's essential that the business community is able to speak with a unified voice and an understanding of the emotions and perceptions that can take control of the process.

In the case of property tax reform, for example, business opposition to legislation shifting the tax burden from local property taxes to the state sales tax was perceived as being insensitive to the concerns of homeowners. Right or wrong, perceptions count for a lot in the legislative process.

Campsen also stressed that on issues such as port expansion, people in the Upstate are not likely to understand our local concerns about the "quality of life" impact of the planned expansion, nor the need to plan ahead to fund additional lanes for Interstate 26 to ensure that port expansion doesn't become the tipping point that gridlocks our main roads.

I think one answer to Campsen's concern is that we need more direct communication between chambers of commerce across the state, at both the staff and volunteer leadership levels, to help build a deeper understanding of the needs and concerns of other areas of the state. That could be a big help in getting business leaders to speak with the "unified voice" needed to make an impact on state government.

In any event, the good news is that the S.C. Chamber and local chambers around the state are moving in the right direction. On matters of public policy, we can be proud that positions taken by our chambers of commerce are usually well crafted to benefit both the business community and the larger community of our fellow citizens around the state. The final piece of the puzzle will consist of building more business clout and effectiveness in Columbia so we can translate those policy positions into successful legislative actions. ■