

Angered by switch

Chambers squabble over name

By Mitchell Hotta
staff writer

Area chambers of commerce are infuriated that the North Oakland Chamber of Commerce changed its name to the Oakland County Chamber of Commerce (OCCC) last fall.

"I just think it's totally misleading," said Eileen Turner, president of the Troy chamber and of the OCCC's rival, the Council of Chambers of Commerce. "They do not speak for the county business community."

She added, "It's actually the Pontiac group with extended borders."

But OCCC officials defend the title, saying they offer countywide services and legislative programs to members all over Oakland.

LOCAL CHAMBER officials apparently fear the county group will raid their memberships.

"They must have made the change to expand their membership base, to solicit members," said the Southfield chamber's Phil Meagher. "They are representing themselves in Southfield as the primary chapter in the county."

Ms. Turner cited an item in the OCCC newsletter last year saying that the name change would resolve the group's financial troubles.

"I have a notion they're interested in getting more members and don't care where they get them," she said.

Earl Kreps, OCCC president, insists the name was changed because his group outgrew the old one.

"The title 'North Oakland' was a misnomer," he said. "Many of our members were in Birmingham, Troy, Royal Oak and Southfield. We didn't think it was appropriate to keep the North Oakland name, when we had a lot of members from the South Oakland end."

The county group provides services for its nearly 1,000 members that local chambers can't or haven't provided, Kreps said.

THE COUNTY CHAMBER runs business seminars, a convention bureau, consumer referrals and a secret witness program that coordinates the efforts of police departments throughout the county, he said. It also lobbies on county and state issues with more clout than a single local chapter can muster, Kreps said.

But officials of local chambers, who organized their own Council of Chambers of Commerce several years ago, don't welcome their new big brother in the county.

Farmington wins safety award

Farmington received an American Automobile Association Pedestrian Safety Citation during the 42nd annual Pedestrian Safety Inventory, reports the Automobile Club of Michigan.

Farmington won the award in the 10,000 to 25,000 population group by going three straight years without a pedestrian fatality. City officials will be presented a plaque in August.

Two Michigan cities earned AAA's Award for Excellence. Warren and Grosse Pointe Farms received the inventory's second highest honor for their outstanding pedestrian safety records and accident prevention programs.

In all, 68 Michigan communities were lauded by AAA. Nearly 2,000 cities and 27 states competed in the nationwide program and 276 awards or citations were presented.

"The OCCC is assuming leadership of the county without any endorsements," Ms. Turner said. "They are a self-appointed chamber."

All chambers are self-appointed in the sense that anyone may incorporate under a chamber name, Kreps said. No authorization is required from the state chamber or any local chambers, which are autonomous, he said.

"They are putting themselves up as the spokesman for all of Oakland County," said Edward Lane of the Farmington chamber. "This is wrong. This is an infringement on the local areas."

"People will assume they're speaking for all of the chambers," said V. Warshawsky, president-elect of the West Bloomfield chamber.

"THEY ARE misrepresenting themselves as the only chamber in Oakland County," charged Lois Haack of the Greater Rochester Chamber.

"We have never said we're the only chamber in this county," Kreps said. "We have never discouraged anybody from joining the local chamber of commerce."

"There's a need for all levels of chambers," he continued. "We're not diluting the smaller chambers. We want to show a strong force to help build and represent them."

Kreps said his group fills a need in the business community that local groups weren't serving.

"If they've got declining membership, it may be the state of the economy and maybe they're not giving their membership the programs that they want," he said. "When there's a void in leadership, somebody has to step in and fill it."

"They're trying to assume a role of leadership," Ms. Turner acknowledged. "They went completely against what all the local chapters wanted. That hardly qualifies them to be the leader."

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