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National leadership group praises the RCGA's efforts

By Eric Heisler

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**Group wants to  
involve business  
in social issues**

The St. Louis Regional Chamber & Growth Association was spotlighted Thursday in a panel discussion about business leadership groups that are "not your father's chamber of commerce."

The attention was focused on the RCGA through its involvement with MetroBusinessNet, a network of business leadership groups, sponsored by the Ford Foundation.

The network of five such groups has met and collaborated over the last three years. Their work culminated Thursday in the release of a short report and a panel discussion by teleconference for national media.

The discussion focused on how leadership groups have become more regionally focused in recent years and have begun addressing social issues, such as reviving an urban core.

The four other participants in the program were based in Washington, San Francisco, Chicago and Austin, Texas.

"These groups all represent a new breed of business-civic associations," said Brian Bosworth, president of FutureWorks, a consulting firm hired to lead the MetroBusinessNet effort.

"In the past, the idea of creating wealth in a community and wanting to help people out were thought of as competing agendas, but we don't think they're competing at all," Bosworth said. "These are communities where the business association is taking a leading role in dealing with issues, such as racial disparities and economic poverty."

FutureWorks and the Ford Foundation plan to expand the program to include similar groups in other cities.

During the panel discussion, "Not Your Father's Chamber of Commerce: Regionalism and the New Business-Civic Organizations," Richard Fleming, president of the RCGA, talked about its work on Technopolis, a 1,000-acre science and technology district planned for midtown St. Louis.

"We're trying to combat a 50-year history of inner-city poverty in St. Louis and a substantial out-migration of jobs and population," Fleming said.

MetroBusinessNet picked the RCGA to participate in the program for several reasons, Bosworth said. St. Louis fit the bill as an older city with a long-suffering urban core, and the RCGA is an example of a business group that has pursued social issues, he said.

And, he said, it didn't hurt that he knows and has worked with Fleming.

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