

Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce

Overview

The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce represents 8,000 businesses in the two-state region. About two-thirds are from Missouri and one-third from Kansas.

In 2000 the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce began a “branding” strategy to examine its mission, constituency, and members. Over the course of three years the Chamber board asked itself several questions. Who should the Chamber include on its Board of Directors — only private-sector business or other regional leaders? Should the Chamber’s mission be focused on its members or focused on the community?

Changes were made. The Chamber added labor organizations and the education community to its Board of Directors. It created an affordable dues structure, for example, to make sure the region’s 20 school districts and their superintendents could afford to join. The Chamber also abandoned its focus on continuous improvement and redefined its mission to making Greater Kansas City a good place in which to live. “The Chamber used to think it served the business community,” says Jeff Comment, former Board member. “But now it thinks it serves the greater Kansas City community through the business community.”

Along with this change in focus, the Chamber has targeted as regional priorities quality-of-life issues in the bi-state region. Those priorities include transportation, early childhood and K-12 education, and enhanced cooperation across the two states. This last priority has included several attempts to create a bi-state tax to pay for regional arts, cultural, and sports and entertainment projects.

Regional Priorities

The Chamber has been a leader in finding regional solutions to challenges on both sides of the state line. In 1996 the Chamber led a campaign in favor of a multi-county sales tax to support cultural institutions in the bi-state region. The Chamber’s efforts were a culmination of eight years of collaboration and regional building. The ballot initiative passed and a complex

ORGANIZATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Type of Organization

Primarily led by companies or employers

Unit of Membership

Company/organization

Number of Members

2003: 2,260

1998: 2,453

Membership by Company Size

Small Companies: 86%

Mid-sized Companies: 10%

Large Companies: 4%

Dues Determined by

Number of company employees

Annual Dues Paid by

Largest Member Companies: \$7,212

Smallest Member Companies: \$500

Annual Operating Budget

2003: \$5 million or more

1998: \$2 million to \$5 million

Staff Members (FTE)

2003: 35

1998: 39

Board Members

2003: 50

1998: N/A

Regional Priorities

Transportation, Early Childhood and K-12 Education, Regional Cooperation

interstate compact was created. The revenues from the five-county .08% sales tax paid for the rehabilitation of Union Station in Kansas City, Missouri and the creation of a new science museum at the station. The taxing authority ended in 2002.

The Chamber tried to build on its success by lobbying hard in 2002 for a new regional taxing authority. The Chamber took a leading role, partnering with many of the same organizations and helping to raise \$1 million. The proposed legislation would have taken the revenues generated by a regional taxing authority to support regional arts programs and renovate a sports complex.

The 2002 campaign was ultimately unsuccessful. The Chamber and its partners were not able to get the issue on the ballot, and campaign efforts have ceased for now. The Chamber is already regrouping, however, and asking itself: What is the next likely regional issue that could be taken to the voters? What regional project will further develop the region's economic future?

The Chamber's other regional priorities include transportation and public education. The Chamber has called for increased state funding for the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority. State funding for public transit in Missouri has not been raised since 1996. The Chamber is also supporting legislative efforts for full funding of the highway and transportation improvements planned under Kansas' 1999 Comprehensive Transportation Program.

THE CHAMBER READJUSTS ITS REGIONAL PRIORITIES

Two events led the Chamber to intensify its focus on improving region-wide cooperation and quality of life. First, the chamber organized a trip of community leaders and politicians to Pittsburgh in 2003. The Greater Pittsburgh area was chosen because of its new regional leadership and collaboration. Greater Kansas City Chamber's web site notes that Pittsburgh "has emerged as one of America's most inspirational turnaround cities." The trip encouraged local leaders to revisit at Greater Kansas City's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. As a result, the Chamber devised a common metropolitan agenda.

Second, the failure of the 2002 bi-state taxation effort forced the Chamber to regroup. Business leadership felt it had to start paying even closer attention to issues that affected Greater Kansas City's ability to act as one region. The Chamber's leadership recommitted itself to be more politically active, with a focus on what is needed to make the metro region a place where people want to live and raise a family. The Chamber made a long-term commitment to this new direction in its 2004 strategic plan.

For more on the plan, see www.kcchamber.com/.

The Greater Kansas City Chamber recognizes that "adequate and equitable funding for schools in the Kansas City metropolitan area helps ensure the quality of education

of local students, thus enhancing the quality of life for the region.” In Kansas, the Chamber has taken the position that the state’s funding formula no longer supports a quality K-12 education. The Chamber supports increased state revenues to adequately and equitably fund public education. In Missouri, the Chamber has said the state’s public education funding formula does not provide enough local control to allow a district to pay for increased capital improvement, accountability and student service needs. The Chamber urges legislators to adequately fund local and state education.

The Chamber uses its political action committee to give money to candidates who agree with its positions on transportation and public education.

Structure and Operations

Membership revenue for the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce is the highest in its history. More than 8,000 members, 86 percent being small businesses, contribute to the Chamber’s annual budget of more than \$5 million. Chamber leaders credit the revenue increase to a revamped mission, a renewed vision statement and deeper member engagement in the development of the strategic plan. The Chamber’s 35 staff persons provide services to its members, the 50-member Board of Directors and the community.

As the Greater Kansas City Chamber grows in regional importance, some local chambers are becoming wary of it. There has been a tendency for smaller communities with smaller chambers to work on their own without regional communication. The Greater Kansas City Chamber has no interest in their constituency, but is trying to think regionally by building relationships with business and chamber leaders in these communities. The Chamber hopes these relationships will provide a platform for cooperation on major regional issues. For example, the Chamber has created a Johnson County Business Leadership Council to represent the CEOs of Kansas’ wealthiest county. The Chamber has also created a Kansas City, Missouri committee to coordinate its city-based efforts with the city’s leaders.

The Chamber has invited 40 superintendents representing most of the region’s school districts to share data with each other in the hope of building cooperation and trust among them. This is the first time anyone has tried to bring this group together. The superintendents are now members of the Chamber, with a special dues structure underwritten by a corporate member and determined by the number of students in the superintendents’ school district. The new membership category ties the education community closely to the business community on educational funding issues. The Greater Kansas City Chamber has also reached out to and added labor unions to its membership.