



Chamber president reflects on a productive year

By Ashleigh Viveiros

Membership was up, participation in at least one annual event reached an all-time high, and the organization is gaining more and more credibility both here at home and on the provincial and national stages.

All in all, 2008 was a pretty good year for the Winkler and District Chamber of Commerce, says president Ken Thomas.

"The Chamber's credibility has increased tremendously in recent years," he said, reflecting on everything that's happened since the Chamber rebranded itself two years ago and refocused its efforts in the business community. "With the role that we're now playing and the results that we're getting, people are taking us more seriously."

The new image the Chamber has fostered in recent years helped to attract several new members to its ranks in 2008, Thomas said.

"In 2008, our membership grew almost 11 per cent," he said, noting the Chamber now has 323 members in the Winkler area.

BR+E makes headway in '08

The Chamber also made very good headway on its long-term Business Expansion and Retention (BR+E) program in 2008, interviewing the second set of 100 local businesses, Thomas said.

From the first 100 of those surveys, the Chamber had gleaned several important recommendations, which they've already begun making progress on, he said.

This year, the Chamber expects to release the results from the second 100 BR+E surveys, along with any new recommendations they'll be pursuing.

"That's going to result in additional recommendations on top of what we're already working on," Thomas said. "And these will be new recommendations coming out of the last 100 surveys, which were focused more on retail."

From there, the Chamber will go on to interview another 100 businesses, leaving the last 200 for future years.

Winkler's BR+E project has attracted the attention of the province's Economic Advisory Council, which sat down recently with project leaders to discuss the program, as well as what makes Winkler successful and how we deal with economic challenges, Thomas said.

"(Our project) was extremely well-received," he said. "It made a huge impact on them."

Other highlights

Last year also had a record-breaking attendance at the Chamber's annual Small Business Luncheon in October, with 166 people coming out to hear the success stories of several area businesses and organizations, Thomas said.

Another highlight of '08 was the September opening of the new Regional Connections office - Winkler's "one-stop shop" for new immigrants to the area. "That facility is running at maximum capacity already ... they saw record numbers last year," said Thomas. "We thought 6,000 square feet was going to be ample and plenty, but for them to reach capacity in three months is amazing."

Similarly, the Chamber's D.A.W.N. (Determining and Addressing Workplace Needs) project has also needed to expand its office space to accommodate its growing needs.

Like BR+E, D.A.W.N - which helps bring skilled immigrant workers together with local employers - has attracted the attention of people outside our community.

"Our Chamber is recognized nationally for our accomplishments," including the D.A.W.N program, Thomas said. "We're definitely leaders in a lot of areas."

Looking ahead

As 2009 gets underway, Thomas says the Chamber already has its plate full for the next several months.

First off, the BR+E program will keep the organization busy as it works on new and existing recommendations and gets started on the next batch of interviews, he said.

Several business workshops and seminars are also planned between now and spring, Thomas said.

"We're going to be presenting more seminars and luncheons that are relevant to what the business community needs now," he said.

Also on the table for this year is to continue working with city council, the local school division, and other community stakeholders as our city continues to deal with the challenges of rapid growth, Thomas said.

“We feel it’s critically important that we’re all on the same page and that we have a unified approach when we approach different levels of government on different matters,” he said, adding the Chamber is also ramping up its regional connections by teaming up and communicating with the Morden Chamber.

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