

Chamber looks back at a solid year

Membership increases to 356

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By Ashleigh Viveiros

One would think that with Canada in the throes of an economic recession throughout 2009, the Winkler and District Chamber of Commerce would have taken its lumps along with the rest of the country.

Not so much, says president Betty Hiebert.

In fact, the Chamber saw its membership increase 12 per cent from the year before, bringing the total number of local businesses signed-up to 356, she said.

That works out to nearly half of the estimated 720 businesses currently operating in the city.

"So we're looking pretty good," said Hiebert.

Although some Winkler businesses were certainly hit hard by the global economic crisis, overall, the local business community is in pretty fair shape, she said.

"It's not like numbers were down everywhere, for every business," she said. "While you do hear about the layoffs at some companies . . . there were certainly people who actually had numbers increase."

Recession or not, the Chamber's numbers have been steadily rising each year since 2007, when the organization rebranded itself and refocused its efforts more heavily on providing the business community with more bang for its membership bucks, Hiebert said.

"The numbers used to be up just a few businesses every year. Now we're much more on track," she said, noting the Chamber today provides businesses with a range of training seminars and workshops, access to information, networking events, and lobbying efforts.

Hiebert noted that about half of the new '09 members were enjoying the Chamber's complimentary first-year of business membership.

However, the number of businesses who choose to continue on with Chamber membership after that first year is up has also been on the rise, she said.

"In the past, we would often lose some of them after that first year," she said. "But now more people have been continuing their memberships - they see the value in it."

Training well-received

In addition to a growing membership base, the Chamber also had its fair share of other highlights in 2009, Hiebert said.

The organization's seminars and workshops on a range of business topics really took off last year, she said.

"Our training seminars have been huge," she said. "Customer service is a big one - the classes are often filled up."

The number of educational offerings the Chamber provides was beefed up in direct response to the results of its ongoing Business Expansion and Retention (BREI) surveys (round three begins this fall), in which area businesses identified the need for more professional development opportunities, Hiebert said.

The Chamber plans to continue offering such workshops in 2010, she said.

"The response we've gotten is really exciting, and we certainly want to continue with that," she said.

Hiebert is also pleased with the work that got underway last year on bringing apprenticeship trades training to the Winkler area.

Talks continue with the Apprenticeship Board and local employers, but the plan is to have the first classes in fields such as plumbing, electrical, welding, and heavy duty diesel mechanics start sometime this year, Hiebert said.

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