

HHACC - Comments of the Economic Development Committee
Is it Political to have an Opinion?

Robert Ashodian

As 2009 comes to an end the Henderson Harbor Area Chamber of Commerce has had a successful year in promoting the activities of its more than 70 business members. Cooperative efforts through newspaper, TV and internet advertising have been very successful. We have done more as a cooperating group than could have been done individually. We have done more than was done in the past. Chamber membership has increased more than 90% and chamber sponsored and supported events were well attended and successful. With more than 45 associate, or non business, members the chamber is well positioned to promote the economic interests of its members. The chamber is doing what a chamber is supposed to do – promote its businesses.

But, the chamber has a second major responsibility – protect its business and community members. Taxation, regulation and the intentions of our federal, state, county and local governments have an enormous impact on our collective well being. Who will speak up?

Some businesses and some individuals speak up through letters to the editor, through active and visible participation in the election process. At the recent public hearings with the Public Service Commission on the proposed transmission line through Henderson it was satisfying, often heartfelt, to see so many people, many of whom were obviously unaccustomed to public speaking, stand up and speak passionately and in some cases very emotionally about issues of deep and personal concern to their families and their way of life. Similarly, many people have become aware of the plans for Galloo Island and have taken the time to write to the Department of Environmental Conservation to voice their objections about Galloo and to request an extension of the public comment period so that all the issues could be heard.

However, it was also clear at the Chamber's annual meeting when a modest amount of funding was allocated to the Economic Development Committee to espouse opinions, that there were those that felt uncomfortable about the Chamber taking a stand on an issue considered political; an implication that it was inappropriate for the Chamber to take a position and voice an opinion.

I am treasurer and a member of the board for the Henderson Harbor Yacht Club, not a big business by any means, but certainly one whose success is impacted by taxes, regulation, Galloo Island and related development plans. They are reluctant to take a position, to step up and be heard. Similarly, talking with other local businesses they too are reluctant for fear of offending their customers or other community members.

I am a tax counselor and auditor for a program known as TCE/VITA (Tax Counseling for the Elderly/Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) in Watertown. Our IRS funding of \$4,000

was denied this year because 65% of the people we served last year were not elderly, but were certainly economically disadvantaged and needed assistance. No one was denied service. We did over 800 tax returns with eleven volunteers. Yet the local organization seems reluctant to stand up and object to the denial of funds by the IRS. The overriding government directive is clear in its arrogance – “decisions of the agency cannot be appealed.” Fortunately, the program will continue this year, but with an alternate source of funds.

Further, on an individual basis, increasingly there seem to be fewer people willing to stand and be heard; somehow afraid of their government; somehow trusting that their government will do what’s right. Many letters to the editor go unsigned: “Concerned Taxpayer”, “Local Resident.” A good person I know, a federal employee, is uncomfortable about opposing her government.

What is wrong? Why wont people stand up and speak out? Are they really afraid? Decisions are being made above us and beyond us, yet we are increasingly cowed by the very government we have elected. This is wrong.

Big business has a business model based on being big, being represented by big law firms, big accounting firms, big lobbying firms and speaking up to their government, which is significantly responsible for their success or failure.

Small businesses and for sure individuals have no such business model based on influencing their government. They are alone and for the most part unrecognized and unheard by their government – federal, state, county and local that will do as they please unless confronted.

The Chamber and its Economic Development Committee is committed to taking a stand on critical issues. The Henderson Harbor Area Chamber of Commerce is likely to lose a few members because we are willing to take a stand. This is unfortunate. But, it is not political to have an opinion; it is an obligation in a free society. Individuals have enormous rights in a democracy, but are forfeiting those rights by simply not exercising those rights.

We urge all of you – stand up and speak out. If you feel a collective voice is better than a single voice, join the Chamber; join the Coalition for the Preservation of the Golden Crescent; join the Heart of Henderson. Whatever you do, stand up and be heard.

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