

Can Durham's Black Community and the Chamber Join Hands?

By Donald Alderman

Tommy Porter, a local businessman, joined Durham's Chamber of Commerce about six years ago. He, like some 850 other local businessmen and professionals, enjoys a number of Chamber programs. These programs include management counseling, seminars and workshops on advertising, robbery prevention, cash flow control, and business location and expansion assistance.

Porter speaks highly of Chamber services and advises that other black businesses should consider joining. Porter is but one of about forty black business operators who are Chamber members.

"I'd advise blacks to join and not only join, but be active," said Porter, who works on two Chamber committees. "Blacks, if active in the Chamber, could influence the location of businesses that are thinking about moving to Durham, such as in the old Hayti area."

While Porter did not make it clear how blacks who are Chamber members can effectively influence such decisions, it is generally understood around Durham that the Chamber of Commerce is an effective "behind-the-scenes" lobbyist with local government. An example is the current downtown civic center proposal. Chamber officials believe the civic center will enhance their efforts to sell Durham both to new companies and to convention planners.

According to Operation Breakthrough director, Fred McNeill, whose agency is also a Chamber member, "when you're in the business that we're in, and that is mobilizing all resources of the community on behalf of the poor, we believe that belonging to the Chamber is a good way to contact a cross-section of city leaders and decision-makers. We call it gathering 'green stamps'."

But, while much of the Chamber's work is readily apparent, the influence that black Chamber members have on that work is not quite as clear.

The forty black businesses that are Chamber members represent a small percentage of Durham's black firms. Several black businessmen who are not members discussed their reasons for not joining the Chamber, asking however, that their names not be used. They said they feared business reprisals if they were publicly associated with their views of the Chamber.

"Besides not being contacted, I don't really have a grasp on what they (the Chamber) do," said one black businessman.

Another black businessman said that Chamber political activities and positions often run counter to his own political purposes. He cited, for example, the East-West Expressway controversy that has raged for years because, among other things, it would destroy the small, predominantly black Crest Street community.

Recently, the controversy was apparently settled when the City and Crest Street residents reached a conceptual agreement that will allow the expressway to be completed without destroying the community.

Others said the services are not worth the membership fees, and that many small business operators are too busy and bothered to have much time for the Chamber and its committees.

Chamber membership fees are based on the type of business a member operates. For example, the fee for apartment complex owners is \$125, plus one

dollar per housing unit. Hotel and motel operators pay \$125, plus \$2.50 per room, while professional firms, such as accountants and engineers, pay \$150, plus \$60 for each professional on their staffs.

But while cost might indeed be a factor that contributes to such a small number of black businesses being Chamber members, the real issue appears to center around the fact that the Chamber has not identified any business problems that are unique to black firms, and black firms appear not to have identified any Chamber programs that address problems they consider to be crucial to survival and success.

Another possible reason that explains the small amount of black involvement with the Chamber is the fact that the organization is a type of business community "political action committee", working behind the scenes to influence important political decisions. Traditionally, the black community has worked its politics through other types of organizations, such as the black church and the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People. Black businesses have not been perceived as having strong political pull. Rather, they have often been seen as more vulnerable to certain economic pressures because of political positions.

According to Chamber officials, the



Future Leaders

A group of participants in the Leadership Development Program sponsored by the Durham Chamber of Commerce listen attentively to a recent

presentation. This session of the annual program was tagged: "Academia and the Community". Photo by Silas Mayfield

local firms. The Durham Chamber has five divisions: economic development, administrative, governmental and health affairs. The Chamber here also sponsors other programs, such as the "City of Medicine" campaign, a promotional effort to make Durham synonymous with medicine. The campaign features Duke University Medical Center and the Durham County General

Hospital. The Chamber's 1982 budgeted revenues total about \$400,000, with a little over \$173,000 going for its eleven-member staff.

But all of its other work notwithstanding, the major Chamber effort is to bring new firms to Durham. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has more than 2,700 local, state and regional chambers in its membership, a new com-

pany that employs 100 workers brings to an urban area about \$872,000 in personal annual income, about \$395,000 more in retail sales and about \$481,000 more in bank deposits.

The local Chamber's economic development director, Jim Camp, says about two of every 100 firms that show an interest in locating in Durham actually come here. He cites a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is the

fact that the city does not have large tracts of land available for industrial development, and that upfront costs for water and sewer in the county are often considered prohibitive. But still he believes that economic development here is on the upswing.

"The Chamber knows that its success is based on how successful it is in bringing new business," said Ed Stewart, director of United Durham Incorporated-Community Development Corporation (UDI-CDC). "It heavily influenced the location of two tenants that are in our industrial park."

The UDI industrial park is located in southern Durham on Fayetteville Road.

Stewart continues: "Black businesses need the Chamber, especially ones that are thinking about coming to town. But the question is how sensitive the Chamber has been in recruiting small businesses, many of which are black."

The answer to the question Stewart poses is really a partial statement of the problem, because Bill Baucom, the Chamber's public relations and membership director, says the Chamber's membership drive that began in January is general and does not target any specific business for Chamber membership.

The membership goal is \$25,000, and this drive is being spearheaded by a team of thirteen Chamber members, and it is not clear to what extent membership recruit-

ment succumbs to a type of self-fulfilling prophecy. This attitude would be to assume, for whatever reason, that most black businesses either are not interested in the Chamber or can't afford the annual membership fees, and therefore, recruitment efforts would be counterproductive.

By the same token, it is not clear how many black business operators assume that since they have not been recruited that the Chamber is a "downtown operation" geared more for bigger firms.

But there might be some changes on the horizon.

At a recent breakfast meeting, Chamber president, John Atkins agreed, according to Chamber officials, to begin working more closely with the Durham Business and Professional Chain.

The Durham Business and Professional Chain was a longtime advocate of the black business community, though it, like the businesses it represents, have often struggled just to survive.

Atkins could not be reached for comment, but I. Jarvis Martin, the Chain's former acting director, said: "...we haven't worked together in the past, but we've agreed to begin work on some projects in the future." He mentioned business education seminars as a type of joint project, but refused to elaborate.

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