

Chamber of commerce membership up 9 percent

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The number of local businesses that are members of the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce has risen 9 percent in the past two years.

Currently, the chamber has 622 members. That is about 44 percent of the local business community, according to chamber President Amanda Witt.

Two years ago, about 35 percent of area businesses were members of the organization, Witt told the chamber's board on Thursday.

Nationwide, the average membership for local chambers of commerce is 27 percent of the local business community, she said.

Board Chairman Jay Edelen said the high percentage in Martinsville-Henry County is notable considering nationwide economic problems.

Chamber officials have attributed recent increases in membership largely to aggressive recruitment campaigns and local companies realizing that being a chamber member can benefit them.

A chamber of commerce promotes the interests of local businesses and provides various types of support and activities to help its members prosper.

Benefits of being a member of the Martinsville-Henry County chamber, its Web site shows, include discounts on products and services that members offer other members, having their products and services promoted by the chamber to newcomers and visitors to the community and recognition as being among the "who's who" of the local business community.

Most of the Martinsville-Henry County chamber's members are small firms. Statistics presented to the board show that almost 59 percent of chamber members have no more than five employees. Seventeen percent have six to 10 employees and 13 percent have between 11 and 50 employees.

Roughly 4 percent of chamber members have between 51 and 100 workers. Slightly more than 3 percent have between 101 and 500 employees and only about 2 percent have more than 500 employees, statistics show.

Chamber officials emphasized the latter statistic, noting that many large companies have left the area in recent years.

While the chamber's membership is growing, its membership revenue has declined somewhat in recent years, due largely to having fewer large firms among its membership. Chamber membership dues vary depending on how many people a business employs.

Officials did not discuss revenue issues in detail.

Two new members, Love Chiropractic Center and Thompson House Bed & Breakfast, joined the chamber during the past month.

One member, KBEL Transport, dropped its membership. Officials did not say why. However, they previously have said the main reasons why businesses sometimes drop their memberships is because they are having to trim expenses or they go out of business.

In other matters Thursday, the chamber board:

- Approved a floor plan for Fast Track 2009, the chamber's annual trade show to be held March 3-4 at the Resurgence Properties LLC building (the former VF/Bassett Walker complex) off Rives Road.

A total of 157 booth spaces will be available, two more than were available at this year's trade show, Witt said. If all of the spaces are rented, the 2009 expo will be the chamber's biggest trade show ever, she said.

- Learned that for the first time in a few years, the chamber has published an annual report.

The report "puts in a nutshell (summarizes) what the chamber is doing" to further the local business community, Edelen said.

Among features of the report are summaries of chamber accomplishments in the 2007-08 fiscal year, the economic impact that the planned Interstate 73 will have on the area and Fast Track 2008.