

Chamber awards are given

Thursday, May 22, 2008

By MICKEY POWELL - Bulletin Staff Writer
Martinsville, VA

Two local businessmen were honored Wednesday by the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce and its affiliate organization, the Chamber's Partnership for Economic Growth (C-PEG).

Gil Carter, an executive with Fidelity Bank, was presented the Fred Herring Award. Lance Heater, president of Southwest Virginia Gas Co., received the Chairman's Award.

The awards were presented during the chamber's 49th Annual Meeting and Leadership Recognition Dinner, held at Chatmoss Country Club. Mark Warner, a former Virginia governor, was the keynote speaker. (See related story.)

C-PEG raises private funds for economic development efforts. It presents the Fred Herring Award.

Herring was a local businessman who died in 2001 after a long battle with cancer. He was "an extraordinary individual" and "extremely vocal in his love for the area," said C-PEG Chairman Jay Hervey.

Carter "is no different," Hervey said. "He also believes that Martinsville-Henry County is an area where businesses and individuals should want to come" and where people should want to raise their families.

The Fred Herring Award recognizes someone who has unselfishly given to the community through volunteerism and working for economic growth.

Hervey mentioned Carter's extensive service to the chamber and C-PEG. He said that Carter will rotate off C-PEG's board soon but plans to stay involved with the organization's strategic planning process.

Carter's "encouraging outlook on our organization has kept all of us extremely optimistic and focused," said Hervey.

The Chairman's Award is presented by the chamber. It goes to the person whom the chamber's board chairman thinks has had the biggest impact on the organization during the past year.

Heater, a former chamber board chairman, is a "very low key" person but has "high energy when it comes to something he believes in, such as the chamber of commerce," said current board Chairman John Parkinson.

Parkinson said Heater “set goals for this chamber and has made sure that we were on a clear path to meet or exceed them.”

“His calm and methodical approach to goal setting and achievement of those goals” made him an excellent chamber leader, said Parkinson.

Neither Carter nor Heater commented upon receiving their awards.

Both Carter and Heater have been involved in other local organizations as well as the chamber, Hervey and Parkinson noted.

During the annual meeting, Parkinson, chief executive officer of Drake Extrusion Inc., noted the chamber’s successes during the past year.

Fast Track 2008 was the chamber’s biggest trade show ever with a record number of exhibitors and record attendance, he said. Chamber membership grew to more than 600 and there were increases in the number of graduates in adult and youth leadership development programs, he added.

Parkinson said the chamber continues to help local businesses in any way it can. He pointed out that it is becoming more involved in efforts to make sure the local work force has skills needed for a transitioning economy.

“We have to help provide new skills for our existing work force,” Parkinson said, “so they can help become productive members of our local work force for new and existing businesses.”

Parkinson said that during his involvement with the chamber in recent years, the community has seen many successes.

Those include the establishment of the New College Institute, the Virginia Museum of Natural History’s new building, the record of decision for the planned Interstate 73, the recruitment of RTI International Metals to Patriot Centre at Beaver Creek industrial park and the groundbreaking for a new soccer complex, he said.

Those successes “are amazing for a small community such as ours,” he said. “I believe they are responsible for creating a more positive attitude (among area residents and business leaders) and providing hope that this community will make a comeback in the years ahead.”

Chamber board Chairman-elect Jay Edelen said “e-commerce” could have an important role in the economic development of Henry County-Martinsville.

“The Internet is the great equalizer,” said Edelen, founder and president of CoolKnobsandPulls.com, a locally based online retail hardware business that ships its

products around the world. “It has fundamentally changed the way that the world does business.”

He cited several reasons why he thinks Henry County-Martinsville is well-suited for e-commerce firms. For instance, the area is located almost in the exact center of the East Coast, which means customers can get shipments in two days or less. And, by being in a small community, companies would see lower operating costs — such as taxes, wages and real estate prices — than they would in a big city, he said.

Edelen said he aims for the chamber to emphasize the development of information technology in the area along with work force development.

“We’ve got to continue to hammer home the point” that businesses must invest in information technology and tools in order to succeed, he added.

Hervey said that since it was launched more than 10 years ago, C-PEG has invested more than \$800,000 of its own funds as well as raised almost \$4.8 million in the community to support economic development efforts.

“We all have a vested interest to make Martinsville-Henry County an even better place to live, work and play,” he said.

C-PEG is trying to find ways to contribute to local small businesses, said Chairman-elect Guy Stanley.

“The private sector must invest in our future in order to keep this area vibrant,” Stanley said.