CREATING A LANDSCAPE FOR ADVOCACY

BY TODD MATTHEWS

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Two years ago, small-business owner Dan Powell noticed a trend that was starting to hurt his business. Powell, president of Star Moving Systems in Tacoma, was meeting job-seekers who served in the National Guard and military reserves, were trained to drive trucks in Iraq and Afghanistan, and were looking for work after deployment. At the time, there was a shortage of truck drivers with Commercial Driver Licenses (CDL's) required by the Washington State Department of Licensing. Many truck drivers who had been deployed found that, after a year or more overseas, their CDL's had expired and they lacked the paperwork to go back to work.

“As I understand it, military training is very extensive and the equipment is comparable to our tractor trailers,” recalled Powell.

He voiced his concern to the Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber. He met with Gary Brackett, manager of business & trade development at the Chamber who is also a point-person on military issues, and Mike Weinman, a consultant hired by the Chamber to advocate the government on issues affecting the business community. Last year, the trio traveled to Olympia to meet elected officials. Legislators heard their case and as a result a budget proviso required the appropriate state agencies to study this issue. “We planted a seed down in Olympia,” Powell said. The issue will be in the Chamber's TEACH agenda (see page 17) for the 2010 legislative session and it has also been adopted as a legislative priority by the Property Partnership's Washington Defense Partnership.

“Dan Powell going down to Olympia was huge,” said Weinman. “Legislators even said afterward that it was good to hear from somebody one-on-one. They hear from lobbyists all the time. But having that time with an actual business owner has an impact.”

Weinman, who spent 13 years as a district director for Congressman Norm Dicks before becoming an independent consultant, would like to meet more people like Powell—Chamber members who contact him to discuss issues and are willing to join him on the advocacy front. During a recent meeting, he described a strategy aimed at fostering more people like Powell. He pulled out a yellow notepad and began to draw a tall, single blade of grass.

“Everybody talks about grassroots,” he explained. “But we need to get down to each blade of grass, each individual member and grow them so our grassroots are much stronger when we talk to elected officials.”

As Weinman sees its, everything begins with a seed—that is, the Chamber provides information to its members through its website, blogs, newsletters and e-mails in order to make a connection. That leads to the base of the blade of grass—a time when Chamber members begin to take action by signing online petitions or sending e-mails to elected officials to let them know they have a concern, for example. As the blade grows, so does the individual's involvement; he or she attends a Chamber event where they can learn more about a particular issue, joins a group that will meet with elected officials and will eventually feel comfortable picking up the phone and contacting a legislator or public official.

Weinman said some Chamber members are already involved at this level, but he would like to see more.

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"I don't think businesses are apathetic," he explained. "I think they are extremely busy and concerned about growing their own businesses."

Chamber members who become involved on the advocacy front have the ability to shape one item in particular—the organization's annual state legislative priorities, more commonly known as the TEACH agenda (Transportation, Economic development and energy policy, Accountability, Community development and work force training, and Health care). These priorities, which determine the Chamber's agenda in Olympia when the legislature convenes, are established by the Chamber's Public Affairs Council. The council consists of government relations representatives from local businesses and organizations such as Intel, Key Bank, Puget Sound Energy, Simpson Investment Company, University of Washington Tacoma, Port of Tacoma and Tacoma Goodwill. They share the issues important to their businesses and customers and compile an agenda that is reviewed, modif ed and approved by the Chamber's Board of Directors.

Looking ahead, a draft version of the 2010 TEACH agenda includes issues such as supporting additional funding of the Local Infrastructure Financing Tool (LIFT) model for job creation, backing incentives for alternative energy production to reduce carbon impacts, controlling costs of workers' compensation and preserving capacity in the higher education system so workers can train or retrain to enter the job market as the economy improves.

But Chamber members don't have to wait for the next legislative session to get involved. Issues arise throughout the year, according to Weinman.

One example of this is Tacoma's so-called B & O "claw back" policy.

"Tax credits were given to businesses in a certain area of Tacoma if they guaranteed they would employ a Tacoma resident for f ve years," Weinman explained. "Halfway through, because of the economy, businesses have had to lay off those people. Well, the City, and especially the Finance Department, decided because [some employers] didn't fulf ll all those years, [they would] have to pay all that money back."

In October, Weinman and a group of small-business owners met with Tacoma City Council members to argue that businesses

already hurt by the lackluster economy would further harmed by this attempt to collect incentives offered in more economically robust times. Council members agreed. They directed the City's Tax and License to hold off on its aggressive collection plan until the Council had more time to study the program.

So what are the f rst steps for Chamber members to get more involved in advocacy work?

"Contact the Chamber," said Weinman. "Depending on what issue it is, we can either take it to our Public Affairs Council or one of our committees to work on it and take action."←

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