

Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce

Overview

The Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce is the largest and most influential of the region's business-led regional civic organizations. The Chamber has 4,000 members representing the region's largest employers. Its 90-person Board of Directors consists of CEOs from important companies such as Bell South, Coca-Cola, Philips Consumer Electronics, Turner Broadcasting, Delta Airlines, Georgia-Pacific, and Wachovia Bank.

The Chamber's large membership and the influence of its members make it a major player in the region. Its leadership acts on key issues affecting the region's competitiveness. Within the last few years the Metro Atlanta Chamber has taken strong stances on transportation, air quality and water resources, K-12 education, and quality growth issues.

Regional Priorities

The Chamber's overall regional mission is to create more jobs and grow the economy. "This is what we are positioned the best to do in our high-growth area," says Chamber President and CEO Sam Williams.

The Chamber's foremost regional priorities fall into three areas. The first is business attraction and retention in five industry clusters. The Chamber's Economic Development Division works to attract "Industries of the Mind" companies to the region — those companies that depend heavily on intellectual capital. The industry clusters targeted are biosciences, telecommunications, computer software and services, logistics and transportation, and corporate headquarters.

The second regional priority is to lead and support the "Atlanta, Georgia — Gateway to the Americas" initiative. The Metro Atlanta Chamber is working with the State of Georgia and several civic partners to bring to Atlanta the trade zone's headquarters, known as the Secretariat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, a trade agreement under negotiation to expand the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include 31 additional nations in the Western Hemisphere. The Metro Atlanta Chamber is raising \$2 million for the effort.

ORGANIZATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Type of Organization

Exclusively business-led

Unit of Membership

Company/organization

Number of Members

2003: 4,000

1998: 6,000

Membership by Company Size

Small Companies: 72%

Mid-sized Companies: 25%

Large Companies: 3%

Dues Determined by

Flat fees based on number of employees and history of company in the community

Annual Dues Paid by

Largest Member Companies: \$15,000

Smallest Member Companies: \$500

Annual Operating Budget

2003: \$5 million or more

1998: \$5 million or more

Staff Members (FTE)

2003: 80

1998: 120

Board Members

2003: 90

Regional Priorities

Transportation, Water, Education, Quality Growth

The third priority is a series of regional quality of life and infrastructure initiatives. These initiatives focus on regional transportation, water, and education. In transportation, for example, the Chamber has been a lead advocate for change. In the late 1990s the region was found to be violating federal standards set by the Clean Air Act. The Georgia Conservancy and Sierra Club and two other environmental groups brought a lawsuit that sought to block the use of federal money for new highway projects until the region adopted a regional transportation plan.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber responded, convened a region-wide task force, and recommended that the state create a new regional transportation authority. The Chamber's efforts led to the creation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and the adoption of a regional transportation plan by the Atlanta Regional Commission (Metro Atlanta's regional planning commission). The federal lawsuit by the environmental groups was eventually settled.

Most recently the Chamber obtained \$750,000 to study and advocate for a high-speed rail line in the Southeast section of the region. The Chamber also has hired a transportation planning firm to study options for high-speed bus service.

On water resource issues, the Chamber has also taken a leading role, co-sponsoring the Clean Water Initiative with the Atlanta Regional Business Coalition. The initiative created a new 16-county water planning district, called the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District. The District has adopted the region's first long-term plans for water supply, wastewater and storm water.

On educational policy, the Chamber's regional education policy committee has worked with superintendents in the region to share good management and accountability practices. The Chamber has also been heavily involved in Atlanta's city schools, bringing about change on the city's Board of Education and its educational policies.

The Chamber maintains a regional focus and tries not to get involved in what it views as government-oriented programs such as workforce development. The Chamber also is careful not to duplicate what other organizations do better. For example, Central Atlanta Progress is a downtown business-led organization that takes the lead on downtown issues, while the Chamber concentrates on region-wide issues.

Structure and Operations

While the Chamber's voice and influence has increased over the last five years, it now employs fewer people and operates fewer programs. The Chamber's 20 or so programs have been consolidated into eight priority areas, and its staff is down to 80, from a high of 120 five years ago. Large and mid-sized companies make up 72 percent of the Chamber's membership base of 4,000 companies.

The Chamber has an annual operating budget of more than \$5 million, which Chamber

leaders expect to stay roughly the same over the next five years. The largest portion of the Chamber's revenue comes from dues (40 percent), followed by one-time fundraising for special programs (30 percent) and Chamber-sponsored events (20 percent).