

HONORING THE PAST – CREATING THE FUTURE

The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce’s Plan for Increasing Prosperity and Building Strategic Capabilities for the Chamber of the 21st Century

The central mission of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce is the cultivation and development of entrepreneurs and communities through the spirit of enterprise.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kalispell Chamber’s quality and reputation have increased greatly over the past decade as the Chamber has implemented its 1995 strategic plan. These successes continue to be built on a strong financial position, good recognition and credibility, and on a growing and committed membership.

As we proceed to make even greater contributions to the cultivation and development of entrepreneurs and communities through the spirit of enterprise, we will continue to implement the strategies from our 1995 plan, which has served us well. The Chamber remains committed to continually improving the nationally-recognized programs and services we provide to business men and women. Our focus on increasing prosperity, on attracting and retaining creative and innovative talent, and on encouraging entrepreneurs must continue to underpin all of our future activities. Similarly, our traditional core values and shared ethical principles must always guide our actions. At the same time, we must acknowledge the fact that conditions in the world are changing ever more rapidly. Therefore, more flexible strategies must be developed which enable the Chamber to accelerate its progress under evolving circumstances.

Like all chambers of commerce, the Kalispell Chamber actively shapes its own future, and is also shaped by external conditions over which the Chamber has little or no control. As the 21st century opens, the external environment for chambers of commerce is quickly changing in significant ways. We anticipate: increasing collaboration among providers of resources to business; increasing demands for accountability; and a growing demand for more sophisticated association services.

No one can foresee how these trends will unfold in the coming years. Additionally, circumstances outside of chambers of commerce, such as unexpected economic or technological developments, may undermine the long-term feasibility of specific strategies that make sense today. As we engage in a planning process that looks ahead 10 to 20 years, we are mindful of these uncertainties and have made no attempt to provide a detailed road map. Rather, we have identified a set of *strategic capabilities* that will help position the Chamber to meet the challenges that are unknowable today. Such capabilities will give the Chamber the expertise and flexibility to adapt to change while taking a proactive stance towards setting and achieving its vision. Ultimately, developing such capabilities will enable the Chamber to better secure its place among the nation’s greatest chambers of commerce.

This strategic plan begins by describing a vision for the Chamber's future, and then proposes the strategic capabilities that will help the Chamber realize that vision. It also puts in place a system whereby implementation of the plan will be reviewed on a regular basis.

II. A VISION FOR THE CHAMBER'S FUTURE

The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce intends to become one of the most influential and productive chambers of commerce in the nation. Three core approaches will underlie our efforts:

- A. *We will conduct a range of research and at the same time work collaboratively with our strategic partners to solve challenges critical to our region and state.*
- B. *We will create a significant regional presence that will increase the visibility, reach, and impact of our business services and resources.*
- C. *We will focus our informational, educational, advocacy, and leadership programs on cultivating and developing business men and women as successful entrepreneurs through the full cycle of their professional lives.*

Our ethical principles and core values regarding free enterprise, continuous improvement, and Montana values underpin each of these commitments.

A. Meeting Community and Regional Needs

Historic but increasingly dated divisions between economic, community, and workforce development organizations often blind professionals and society at large to the opportunities of cooperative solutions to increasing prosperity. By creating structures which enable and encourage synergistic interactions among different kinds of organizations, we will secure our status as a chamber of major societal importance.

The vision for the Chamber's future emphasizes becoming a major force in addressing critical issues facing society and creating new societal opportunities. Along with excellence in providing tools and resources to business men and women, we will be recognized as the chamber with the greatest societal impact – the place where knowledge, information, and talent are brought together to create solutions to the pressing concerns of society.

Focusing on community problems positions the Chamber for competitive success in a changing environment. As we move further into the 21st century, society will increasingly value chambers actively engaged in addressing issues of practical societal importance. Business men and women we cultivate and develop will be judged on the basis of such contributions.

Leveraging the Chamber's Strengths

This element of the vision recognizes some of the distinguishing features of our Chamber, including its location in a regional trade center, size of business participation, breadth of geographic representation, diversity of industry categories, close ties to the local community and Montana, its one-hundred years of experience, and its outstanding business services and capabilities. The problems that our Chamber can address span an extraordinarily broad range.

The Chamber's long-standing efforts to link business and community research with cooperative solutions to increasing prosperity already contribute to action by a number of different organizations, and these efforts will grow in the future. Existing efforts include the Business Expansion and Retention program, the Flathead Regional Business Center, and the Workforce Learning Academies.

B. Expanding Regional Presence

The convergence of technology, communications, transportation, and education will require chambers of commerce to become truly regional in presence, focus, and scope in order to address society's major concerns.

Most of our major concerns are at least regional in scope: economic development, sustainability, environmental quality, health, transportation, housing, security. Thus, our endeavors on society's important problems will require access which cuts across political boundaries.

The histories of the Chamber and the region it serves are closely linked, and have evolved together. Kalispell and the Flathead Valley increasingly form the economic, political, and cultural center for Northwest Montana. Political decisions made far away, in Helena, Washington, D.C. and beyond, have direct influences on Kalispell. Similarly, the influences of Kalispell business and demographic trends extend well beyond the borders of our county. To best serve the interests of Kalispell and Northwest Montana, our professional staff must understand the regional, national, an international context in which we operate.

As we project our presence to the region and nation, we will attract the most talented entrepreneurs in the world. We seek to become the community of choice for future business leaders.

Leveraging the Chamber's Strengths

Beginning in the earliest days, when Kalispell served as the county seat for what is now Flathead, Lake, and Lincoln counties, the Chamber worked to develop transportation and educational infrastructure, conduct national promotion campaigns, and address workforce issues. More recently, the addition of the Small Business Development Center, Procurement Technical Assistance Center, and Flathead Regional Business Center have made the delivery of regional business development services an integral part of our business plan. The present vision builds on these traditions.

The Chamber's reputation and network across the region provide a strong base on which to build. The Northwest Montana Business Expansion and Retention program

provides a more structured vehicle to coordinate the delivery of business services across city and county boundaries. Chamber professionals represent the region at the state level on transportation and economic workforce issues, at the multi-state level on economic development issues, and at the national level on education, employment and training issues.

The regional trade center nature of Kalispell is itself another advantage. Our local community comprises large numbers of businesses, individuals, and organizations with regional linkages. As a result, we do not have to choose between focusing on local versus regional issues and interests; in most cases, they are one and the same.

C. Cultivating and Developing Business Men and Women

The entrepreneur-centered chamber of the 21st century will focus on the needs of business men and women rather than the structure and needs of the chamber of commerce.

The entrepreneur-centered chamber gives priority to the needs of business men and women. This means thinking expansively about who our customers are, how their backgrounds and needs may change in the future, and how best to engage in cultivating and developing their skills. This new approach translates into greater flexibility and individual responsiveness in the way we structure and deliver business services and resources.

New technology enables new ways of serving business men and women. Today, technology makes information broadly accessible, and knowledge accumulates so quickly that information rapidly becomes outdated. Therefore, we need a new approach to the delivery of business services that moves beyond transmitting information. Instead, chamber professionals must play a more active role in helping entrepreneurs lead their businesses.

An entrepreneur-centered approach will attract business men and women. By becoming more innovative and responsive, we will be better able to recruit the next generation of business leaders and will advance the Chamber's overall mission and reputation.

Leveraging the Chamber's Strengths

Over the past decade, the Chamber has received state and national recognition for its entrepreneur-centered services. A good example is our workforce development programs, which have earned us the William Heartwell, Jr. Award from the National Association of State Workforce Agencies, and the Desiree Taggart Memorial Award from the State Workforce Investment Board. The Flathead Regional Business Center offers seminars on business plans, marketing, human resources, government contracting, and financing. Sessions are offered in Flathead, Lake, and Lincoln counties. Also helpful are NxLevel courses for entrepreneurial training. In addition, we are learning how the Chamber can best integrate the for-credit and non-credit courses of the College with the peer-to-peer learning that entrepreneurs demand.

III. DEVELOPING AND COMMUNICATING STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES

The vision of the Chamber we have described will require fundamental change over the long term. To create such evolution, we believe that the Chamber should focus on developing three strategic capabilities as described below. Although the process of change will extend well into the future, we can begin the process immediately by launching a number of initiatives to lay the groundwork for developing capacity in each of these areas. The hard work of board members, general members, and professional staff will ensure the success of these efforts.

A. Span Disciplinary and Political Boundaries to Focus on Problems of Community and Regional Significance

Since our challenges rarely fall within the domain of a single discipline, organization or jurisdiction, collaboration that brings together different perspectives and skills may be the best means of addressing such problems. We must create mechanisms that remove structural disincentives to such collective efforts on problems of major significance. We have made significant strides in building this capacity as a result of our 1995 strategic plan, but we must now move forward more aggressively.

Second Year Initiatives to Develop this Strategic Capability:

1. Creating a Planning Framework for Business and Community Success.

The unprecedented population growth of the last few years and the surge in residential, retail, and commercial development, cause us to raise the priority of these issues to a new level. The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce will work to represent the voice of business in the city and county planning process. Some areas of our focus will include the following:

- Providing predictability in the planning, zoning, and development process
- Directing quality growth to areas where cost effective public services can be provided
- Aligning the payment for growth with the cost of growth
- Creating community prosperity while preserving Montana values and natural resources

2. Launch Education and Workforce Strategic Plan. The Kalispell Chamber of Commerce has long-recognized the critical role of quality education and workforce investment in keeping Kalispell business competitive. In a knowledge-based, global economy of the 21st century, a well-educated workforce is the key to innovation, economic development, and community prosperity. Educators, business, and government at all levels must do better. The growing skills shortage evident today and the clear demographic trends require us to raise the involvement of the Chamber to a much higher level of engagement. If the business community clearly articulates the skills needed for successful employment, then education and workforce development systems will have a better understanding of how to best prepare all citizens to be ready for successful postsecondary education and work at all career levels.

B. Build Networks and Partnerships

Because the Chamber will not encompass all the skills and knowledge required to address major community needs and questions, we will develop new partnerships and joint ventures with various kinds of entities. These will include governmental organizations, businesses and corporations, and private non-profit entities. And since important social problems do not stop at borders, we will work across municipal, county, school district, and even national boundaries.

Whether our partnerships are with organizations across the street or across the country, they should significantly benefit the us by (1) enhancing research, knowledge, resources, and skills that are unavailable at the Chamber; (2) enabling us to provide new opportunities without creating expensive infrastructure or expanding professional staff. As with any effective partnership, these efforts must also prove beneficial to our collaborator.

Our relations with policymakers are also becoming increasingly important, and we need to build our capacity in this area. The Chamber's ability to have an impact on society requires strong ties to local, state, and national policymakers. As we move forward, it is essential that we work systematically to build alliances at all levels of government.

Second Year Initiatives to Develop this Strategic Capability:

- 1. Expand Capabilities of Regional Business Center.** The Flathead Regional Business Center advocates the coordination of business services, one-stop access, and the co-location of programs as the best way to serve the business sectors of our region. Onsite partners with expertise in economic, community, and workforce development work in the multi-county region of Northwest Montana. The one-stop nature of the Center has made great strides in creating an entrepreneur-centered environment. Now it is time to increase our capabilities even further through (1) creating additional office and conference space to meet our needs now and in the future, and (2) adding additional strategic partners that provide complementary skills, resources, and knowledge.
- 2. Extend Structured, Systematic Business Retention Program.** The Business Expansion and Retention Program is a structured, systematic business retention program. It centers on an economic and community development service delivery system modeled after successful private sector customer service programs. Knowledge gained from CEO's about their businesses is used to respond to their immediate and long-term needs. The research conducted on CEO's views and opinions about the business climate is used to develop programs and policies that make Montana a more competitive business location. This knowledge will create opportunities to (a) communicate best practices to other business men and women (b) provide feedback to rated governmental and community organizations and (c) report research results to policy makers and business leaders.

C. Increase Responsiveness to Business Men and Women

To become entrepreneur-centered, the Chamber must develop two related capabilities: (1) create structures and methods to better fulfill business needs, (2) harness technology for more responsiveness and flexibility in cultivating business men and women.

Creating more structures and methods means shifting priorities from how the Chamber is currently structured, toward what businesspeople need to learn and how they can best access skills and information. The structure of our interaction and communication with business men and women will become more flexible and customized.

New technologies will continue to expand the opportunities to access business services and acquire new business skills and information. Technology also allows support services and resources to become more integrated and more responsive to entrepreneurs.

Finally, increased responsiveness to entrepreneurs means providing more tools and resources throughout the full cycle of their professional lives from early in their careers through retirement. In this way, the Chamber can serve a broader base of businessperson.

Second Year Initiatives to Develop this Strategic Capability:

1. **Extend Tiered Membership System.** Tiered membership allows a business man or woman to choose the level of service and marketing they would like to receive from the Chamber.
2. **Extend Sponsorship Opportunities.** Each program or service provides an opportunity for sponsorship recognition, marketing, and participation. The most promising of these opportunities will be given priority for implementation.
3. **Build New Web Site.** Create a new web site which reflects the breadth and quality of services available at the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce and the outstanding features and amenities which make Kalispell and Northwest Montana such an outstanding place to live, work, and recreate.

IV. MAINTAIN CORE VALUES

Developing these strategic capabilities will require far-reaching changes in our structure. It is important, therefore, to ensure that evolution of the Chamber remains grounded in our core values.

Four sets of core values are particularly critical in this context. First is free enterprise, an institutional commitment to experimentation, investment, initiative, competition, and risk-taking.

The second set of values is continuous improvement. This standard includes: a constant improvement of business and community quality, a commitment to progress and prosperity, and an awareness of the latest trends, best practices, and newest thinking.

The third set of core values is usually described as the values of Montana, standards which have long defined the Chamber's interaction with its members and the public and will continue to guide us into the future. These standards include: caring and respect for one another, attitudes of genuineness and independence, commitment to clean air and water, a culture supportive of children and families, a tradition of quality schools and safe neighborhoods, a dedication to healthy communities, and a love of the natural land and the lifestyle it offers.

The fourth and final set of core values comprises our pledge to ethical conduct. This standard includes: the promise of ethical behavior, healthy competition, and a commitment to business practices which benefit customers and communities.

These values define our community, sustain a sense of cohesiveness, and connect us to our past and our future. They will guide us in making difficult and sometimes risky decisions, and will help us make choices that preserve the Chamber's integrity, community, and quality.

V. EVOLUTION AND EVALUATION

Attaining this vision for the Chamber will require ongoing oversight. Existing initiatives must be evaluated, reshaped, and sharpened, while at the same time new initiatives must be created which will further develop the strategic capabilities of the Chamber. Innovative approaches must be developed which will move the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce further on its journey to becoming one of the most influential and productive chambers of commerce in the nation.

Under the leadership of the Board of Directors, this plan for increasing prosperity will be monitored and extended. This evaluation will lead to recommendations for improving the initiative, or to terminating it if it is not working or if the objectives have been reached. In addition, each year the Board of Directors will propose new initiatives to support and extend the plan. These recommendations will be made at the end of summer so that they can be discussed in detail at the fall Board Planning Retreat. The modified and newly developed initiatives then will be shared with committee chairmen so that they can be incorporated into the business plan and budget for the following year.

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