

GMG goal: An issue clearinghouse

Committee started to encourage public affairs engagement

By Dan Linehan

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MANKATO — For many chambers of commerce, civic engagement means taking a position and lobbying for issues. One position. The “business” position.

But area businesses are so diverse — in their size, industry and ownership — that a single position can’t represent a consensus, said Kay Wallerich, an attorney at Farrish Johnson.

So Greater Mankato Growth, the business representation and economic development organization, decided to go a different route as it decided how to help its members become more civically engaged.

The result, the first stages of which are coinciding with the electoral filing period, is being developed by a committee of business representatives.

They have a variety of specific tactics, including information on filing for office, forums for candidates, voter participation and surveys of businesses on various topics. All of their efforts fall under the umbrella of impartial information delivery, whether it be for the potential candidate, voter, business or politician.

Their efforts begin as does an aspiring politician’s.

“I think my perception is there’s been a decline in interest for running for public office, at a local, state and to some extent national level,” said Dan Sarff, manager of engineering firm Bolton & Menk’s Mankato office.

In an effort to encourage good people to run for local office, the committee developed seven characteristics that an ideal politician should have. They include: fiscal responsibility, conscientiousness in using data

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Surveys are on the way

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from multiple sources to research issues and strong communication. For more information, go online at greatermankatogrowth.com and click on Greater Mankato Growth and Public Affairs.

The committee won't be grading candidates based on these measures, but it will be tailoring questions that emphasize these values. And because of its tax-exempt status, it cannot endorse individual candidates.

Ryan Spaude, a financial planner and co-owner of Kitchenmaster & Co., said many people believe they don't have time for public office. But the recession and its effects on government may have "awoken some people to these issue," he said.

The committee also wants to develop profiles of and questions for the candidates as well as host or publicize candidate forums.

Perhaps the most interesting of the committee's work is reserved for elected office holders.

Greater Mankato Growth is developing surveys of its members on particular issues so that a politician can gauge the business community's reaction.

It'll be deeper than a yes/no response — they want to break apart the responses to tell politicians how a particular industry or business size reacts to an issue. A bill could have the support of almost all businesses with fewer than 20 employees, for example, but strident opposition from larger companies.

Spaude says detailed information will help politicians listen to their constituents — not their own agenda or party.

Likewise, the committee hopes Greater Mankato Growth will be the provider of information on issues and personal access to politicians for its members.

For Wallerich, the attorney, their role is that of an information clearinghouse and a facilitator.

She worked as a legislative assistant in the Nebraska Legislature, and said politicians would get stacks of identical form letters with only the signature varying. Read one, you've read 'em all. Not the best way to convey a personal message.

In the future, Wallerich hopes the public affairs committee will be a daily provider of a meaningful, back-and-forth conversation between its members and politicians.