



Sacramento Chamber's inclusive tent

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

The Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce has been hosting its annual Dinner & Business Awards gathering for 124 years. Last Friday evening at the Hyatt Regency downtown, hundreds arrived, many in tuxedos and gorgeous dresses.

I have been a Sacramento business owner for the last 30 years. Over those decades, the Chamber's mission and goals have changed frequently, reflecting changes in Sacramento's business mix, the varying political climate and, most of all, changes in the Chamber's leadership.

There is division among business owners across the country and here in Sacramento about their role in the broader community. Should businesses be community partners, working with their employees and other citizens to build healthy productive communities? Or should businesses be focused upon profits over everything else?

There is a commonly held belief, most notably represented by the Koch brothers, that the primary responsibility of business owners is to maximize their profits at all costs. As a result, some businesses pay less than a living wage, contribute very little to nonprofits and fight taxes needed to fund local infrastructure such as adequate schools or police. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has acted to support this conservative philosophy. It has been a leading force against universal health care, against worker safety and against funding of social programs.

But there are many business owners like myself who believe that it is smarter to sacrifice some short-term profits to have better and more sustainable communities. Our community needs well-paid employees with disposable income to buy products; we need good schools to train future employees; and we do better when we can create win-win agreements with employees and customers.

Over the last three decades, various Sacramento Chamber leaders have staked out different positions on these issues. Matt Mahood, who was the Chamber's CEO from 2002 to 2011 and who now heads up Silicon Valley's Chamber, supported a progressive agenda.

But former Assemblyman Roger Niello and former legislative staff member Peter Tateishi, Republicans who served as CEOs after Mahood, both saw the Chamber's role as being part of a conservative political coalition and supported an agenda similar to the national chamber's. In 2014 and 2016 the Chamber's political action committee was a major funder of the campaigns of Republican Trump supporters Doug Ose and Sheriff Scott Jones against Democratic Congressman Ami Bera. The PAC also funded vicious, untrue attack ads against Darrell Steinberg in his mayoral campaign.

But now Amanda Blackwood, the new CEO and first woman to head the Sacramento Chamber, hopes that the Chamber can become a more progressive organization, creating an inclusive tent where business owners on both sides of the political divide can join with elected officials from both parties and leadership of schools, hospitals and nonprofits to help solve many of our region's challenges.

At the last few annual events, the Chamber made a pitch for donations for the conservative political action committee. At the gathering last week, we heard from Rep. Doris Matsui, a Sacramento Democrat, and Janine Bera, speaking for her husband.

We heard from many business leaders, and it was clear that we were in a large tent. It was worth getting dressed up for. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.

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