



A Chamber of Commerce Primer

In the latter part of 2009, the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce fielded questions regarding some advertisements being run on television and in print. These ads were produced and run by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and many erroneously believed the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce – *your* local Chamber - was associated with these ads. The term “chamber of commerce” is one of the oldest and most well-recognized brands in the world, but there is significant public misunderstanding of its meaning. The lack of understanding is in large part self-inflicted because chambers in various towns, cities, regions, states and even nations focus on different things and actually operate in different ways.

Recently, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Executive staff produced a chamber of commerce “primer” to help the public better understand the subtle differences and similarities between chamber organizations. We wanted to share some salient points of this primer to help clear up any lingering confusion or misconceptions.

Chambers have existed in the US for more than two centuries and, while missions may vary, most chambers strive to build communities to which residents, visitors and investors are attracted; Promote those communities; Strive to ensure future prosperity via a pro-business climate; and represent the unified voice of the employer community. Membership is based on the private, volunteer membership model. Chambers **do not** operate in the same manner as a Better Business Bureau or trade association, which can bind its members under a formal operations doctrine -- and, thus, can remove them.

The most difficult aspect for the general public, media, government officials and even some businesses to understand is that there is literally no inherent hierarchical structure in the chamber world. This can be extremely confusing to those who naturally assume that a few thousand entities sharing the same name *must* be related and that some ordered lineage must exist among them. That is simply not the case. In the chamber world, nobody is “in charge” of anybody; a local chamber does not answer to a state or national chamber.

When business and economic policy priorities align, chambers may attempt to work together and speak with a unified voice. Inevitably, conflicting positions will arise about some issues, or about strong positions (or lack thereof) of chambers at various levels.

How does all of this relate to the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce?

- The Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce is currently not a member of the U.S. Chamber. While we both have the mission of being an advocate for business, we are not affiliated with each other.
- We are a current member of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce.
- Any position that the Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce takes is driven by the 200+ volunteers who make up our advocacy division. This division which is led by the Advocacy Council and Legislation Council -- a diverse group of individuals with diverse political views that come together as members and business leaders to shape any position our local organization takes on a particular issue. They spend a great deal of time researching, discussing and even surveying the Chamber's membership.
- Any recommended position must be approved by the Chamber's Board of Directors -- another group of volunteers that is a cross-section of our business community. At no time is a position taken that has not gone through this extensive vetting process.
- All positions and decisions are made locally, by local volunteers.
- Because both The Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce and the U.S. Chamber are both advocates for business, our volunteers *may* find areas of agreement, but when that does occur, it is not without much discussion, thought and -- of course -- the complete vetting process.

Please do not hesitate to contact The Chamber to learn more by calling (812) 366-6381.