

Stand up, speak out — together ^{9/10/09}

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



In this unprecedented time when businesses of all sizes are struggling to survive, we must stand up

and speak out together.

We know it seems counter-intuitive to ask business owners/leaders — who are putting in extraordinary hours to keep their employees employed, protect their livelihood and investment, and continue to serve this community — to take time away from these efforts to be more involved in legislative matters and regulatory processes.

But that is exactly what the Maui Chamber of Commerce is asking businesses to do. Why? Because despite these unprecedented times and the hardships, there continues to be little recognition for what the private sector brings to the table and the positive role businesses play in our economy, employment, environment and quality of life.

Just look at the visitor industry. This industry is recognized widely as our No. 1 industry and crucial economic engine, impacting all businesses on this island in one way or another; yet year after year, this industry that employs so many has to plead for support. In good economic times, there is little recognition for the fruits this

industry continually brings. Too often it takes times like these for some to wake up.

Furthermore, as we struggle to bring visitor counts and spending back up — doing everything possible to keep doors open and people employed — negative sentiments and language about the industry exist in our draft Maui Island Plan. The latter is the part of our General Plan that sets the direction for the island for the next 20 years. Such sentiments and language are inappropriate, and must be changed — and businesses need to say so.

The Maui Chamber of Commerce strongly promotes the business sector and represents the voice of business with government, but we need more help. While we represent the voice of many, we need standing beside us a band of business leaders, employees, retired business people and those who understand the importance of the sector.

It is not that our voice is not unified; it is. However, business people are busy running their businesses. In the past, the sector was recognized as a silent majority with considerable weight given without them having to show up. But swirling legislation and burdensome regulation of late indicate that businesses are not receiving the same consideration now.

Despite the chamber and various industries working with government on reasonable legislation, administrative

departments and elected officials are taking up more and more initiatives that continue to hurt businesses and hamper our economic recovery.

Recent examples on a county level involve transient-vacation rentals and the Commercial Ocean Recreation Activities rules, not to mention the “Show Me the Water” and Residential Workforce Housing bills. Economist Leroy Laney noted that both those bills were ill timed and in need of change.

At the state level, there were the transient-accommodations-tax increase, Card Check bill, workers’ compensation bills, etc. The state also is looking at our in-stream water flows and wants to keep more water in the streams. This decision could have a devastating impact on Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co., which currently employs around 800 full-time workers. They need our help.

Businesses have expected they simply would get the recognition they deserve and reasonable regulation, but that is not the climate we are in today.

The business voice often is overshadowed by small, vocal groups that accuse businesses of looking out only for themselves and the “almighty dollar”; this messaging must stop, too. Business people care about the environment and quality of life; we live here as well. Profit is not a bad word; it keeps businesses running and people employed. Without it, we

would see more devastation in our community with business closings, additional people losing their jobs, and reduced options with lost products and services.

While government often hits the business sector with increased regulation and higher fees and taxes (often without a comparable increase in resident taxes) to make up revenue shortfalls, people wonder how many more hits government thinks businesses can take. Some businesses are one blow away from a mortal wound, and many need intensive care now!

We cannot sit idly by and hope to be heard because, as Gov. Linda Lingle recently said, there are consequences to not standing up and speaking out.

She challenged us all to share what we are “for.” The Maui Chamber of Commerce — composed of diverse Maui businesses that believe, and continually invest, in this community — is always happy to do. The chamber will be 100 years old in 2010, and coincidentally has more than 100 position and supporting statements that share what its members are “for” at www.maui-chamber.com (About Us section). Please learn more about the chamber and call 871-7711 to get more involved, stand up, speak out and advocate for the business sector.

■ *Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.*