

Take Your Seat...Understanding The Chamber's Role As Advocate

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If your Chamber is like ours, you're still trying to figure out how we and our political priorities are standing during this legislative session. This session is different, isn't it? Compared to the last, very pro-business session, this particular session doesn't smell exactly the same. As I draft this article, some bills won't survive but there is still time in the session to get uglier and dirtier, however, I don't hold out much hope for it to be any more business friendly.

We've been through the sanctuary bill, bathroom bill, anti-local control bills (property tax reform for example), minimum wage increase bills, eliminating the Texas Enterprise Fund, all sorts of stuff that is not considered pro-business legislative activity in a supposed pro-business State. There is some good business legislation though; health care and education bills, a good chance to decrease or even eliminate franchise taxes, and other bills we all are monitoring. Overall, many folks don't consider the 85th session anywhere close to being as business friendly, pro-local control as sessions in the past, especially the 84th session.

Why is all this important to Texas Chambers of Commerce? These legislative outcomes effect our business members and when they are negatively impacted, so are local Chambers of Commerce. It's not all about the dues or non-dues revenues our business members provide us but it is more about doing what we can to ensure commerce thrives in our communities and in our State. Chambers of Commerce have long been called upon to represent our communities and business members as the voice of business. As most of us have learned over the years in governmental affairs training, "If you aren't at the table, you're probably on the menu." If you haven't been involved this legislative session, you probably ought to consider preparing for the next one starting immediately after this one is over.

Take this next thought into serious consideration when it comes to either starting your government affairs program or maturing to a level where you are "at the table." In the ACCE "Horizons 2025" chapter on "Political and Social Fragmentation," social and political trends that cause polarization in politics and society drew on a Pew Research study that reflected the political parity of the previous decade. Little did we know then (2015) about the extent of the vitriol and animosity of last year's elections, unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes.

Our good friend and mentor, ACCE CEO Mick Fleming and the Horizons Initiative describe a logical role for Chambers to play, be the *sane center*: "Chambers have the potential to employ their considerable consensus-building experience and position of trust to provide workable alternatives to fringe dogma and out-of-hand dismissal of compromise. Articulating shared values, rather than divisive talking points, will be needed more than ever in the coming decade."

Our chambers should consider representing pro-business, pro-jobs, pro-growth policies emanating from our business communities. "If a public policy 'sane middle' arises, it will likely spring from business leaders and other influential individuals, rather than from government officials, excepting the most courageous, of course," states the same Horizons chapter.

Many of us have plenty of stories to tell about successes as well as failures when it comes to the positions and roles our Chambers take in the political arena. It is not about sitting on the sidelines but sitting at the table. It is about representing our members and playing the sane center on behalf of business.