

Michigan Chamber PAC Packs a POWERFUL PUNCH

by Jenny Cromie

It's election time. And, like most business owners, Mike Windemuller spends countless hours every week running his Wayland-based electrical and communications contracting company which doesn't leave him a lot of time to track the candidates running for office this November or the issues that impact his business.

But, given Michigan's current economic conditions and the fact that it's such a pivotal election year, the 35-year business owner believes it's more important than ever to do everything he can to make a difference. By contributing to the Michigan Chamber of Commerce

Political Action Committee (PAC), "my thinking is that I'm contributing to a positive business climate in Michigan."

Over the years, Windemuller knows that the Michigan Chamber has paved a better future for his business and others throughout the state. The Michigan Business Tax issue is just one recent example, he says. If not for the Chamber and its PAC's involvement, Windemuller is certain that his business would be shouldering a much larger tax burden.

"It's difficult enough just keeping your business going from day to day, let alone trying to keep track of what's going on in Lansing and how it's going to affect

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your business. Even making a phone call to Lansing sometimes is difficult because you get so wrapped up in what you're doing day to day," he says. "The Michigan Chamber speaks louder and has more clout than I do as one individual company."

Frederic Satterlund contributes to the Michigan Chamber PAC for many of the same reasons. The owner of Satterlund Supply Company, an industrial distributor of pipe, valves, and fittings in Warren, says the Michigan Chamber is much more effective than he could ever be as an individual when it comes to tackling business issues in Lansing.

"And it's local enough to really affect my business and bottom line," he says.

Michigan business owners haven't always had a strong, unified voice in Lansing, however.

Up until 1977, Michigan corporations were prohibited from making direct contributions to state and local candidates, says Bob LaBrant, Senior Vice President of Political Affairs and General Counsel for the Michigan Chamber. "Business really had no institutional political arm." By contrast, labor organizations like the AFL-CIO were allowed to contribute directly to political candidates.

Watergate and resulting changes in federal campaign finance laws began to change all that. In 1976, Michigan passed a campaign finance law with a provision allowing interest groups to establish, solicit, and administer funds. The law went into effect in June 1977, and shortly afterward, the Michigan Chamber Board of Directors created the Michigan Chamber PAC.

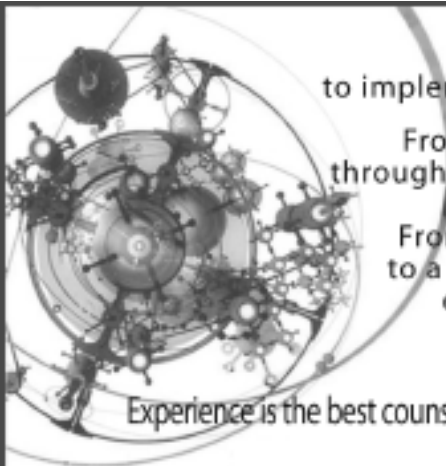
"The passage of that Michigan campaign finance law gave the business community a green light to organize politically in much the same manner that labor unions had over the years," says LaBrant, who has sat at the helm of the Michigan Chamber PAC since its inception 31 years ago.

The Michigan Chamber PAC also has been instrumental in helping a number of pro-business candidates get elected to public office.

MICHIGAN CHAMBER PAC HAS SCORED BIG WINS FOR BUSINESS

— Since that time, the Michigan Chamber PAC has scored big wins for the more than 7,100 member firms who depend on it to represent their interests in Lansing. In addition to helping the Big Three

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and other businesses form their own political action committees, the Michigan Chamber PAC historically has wielded a lot of clout in a number of state elections and issues.

In 1982, the Michigan Chamber PAC supported Dana Wilson in a special Senate election in the Democratic primary. Wilson prevailed over Gary Vanek, and for the first time, a candidate with all the traditional union endorsements was defeated in a Democratic primary. The 1990s also were significant—the PAC played a key role in changing the state's political landscape, LaBrant recalls. As late as the 1978 election, there were 70 Democrats and 40 Republicans in the State House of Representatives. By 1992, the State House was evenly divided with 55 Democrats and 55 Republicans.

The Michigan Chamber PAC also has been instrumental in helping a number of pro-business candidates get elected to public office. The PAC endorsed John Engler in his bid for governor in 1990. And in 1994, it stood behind Candice Miller in her to defeat 24-year incumbent Richard Austin for Secretary of State.

This year, LaBrant says the PAC once again will play a key role in the elections. There are some tough Michigan House of Representatives races, and control of the State House is at stake. Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Clifford Taylor also faces re-election, a race that could upset the State Supreme Court's current conservative majority.

Fortunately, Chamber members are doing their part to help, says Barb Goodman, the Chamber's manager of political finance.

"So many of our members are frustrated with state government," she says. "And with the tough economic times in Michigan, if members can afford it, they are helping out with small contributions. Contributions are up because it is an election year."

For more information on the Michigan Chamber PAC, contact Barb Goodman at (517) 371-7654 or email her at bgoodman@michamber.com. Information on the PAC is also available on the Chamber's web site at www.michamber.com. ●

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