

9/1/2006 10:10:00 AM

## Chamber taking a year off?

A monthly column

By **BILL BAILEY**

Guest writer



### About the writer

Bill Bailey is executive director of the Greater Seymour Chamber of Commerce. He writes a monthly column for The Tribune.

The Greater Seymour Chamber of Commerce turns 75 this year. In those many years it has never taken a vacation. So, we're going to take one. Please accept this as our notice that we are taking a year off.

Whatever we've been doing, we're putting on hold for a year. That's things like our Education Task Force to get more training and college classes here. We won't be holding any more meetings on reversing the brain drain of citizens and students who move someplace else to work. Instead of trying to expand our Chamber Gift Check program to drive business to our members, we hope that the loss will be made up by cash purchases. Instead of holding legislative breakfasts to meet our elected officials face-to-face, we suggest trying to reach them over their 800 number. (Just keep dialing, you may eventually get through.)

For 2007, some of the things like the Adopt-a-Spots, the One Chamber Square Christmas, the Farmer's Market and our Ag breakfasts can probably be picked up by other organizations.

I personally hate to quit working on the Jackson County Business Academy, a major agricultural commodities wholesale market, trying to obtain a family court, partnering more closely with the Visitors Center on tourist-related economic growth and working toward a campus location dedicated to worker training and college classes. But, maybe those projects can be resurrected in 2008, and if not, well, then we'll just have to do without them.

Seriously, and obviously, the chamber isn't going to take a year off. Monday through Friday, 52 weeks a year, we plan on being open to support our member businesses and help grow the county economy.

Each fall, the Chamber's board of directors takes some focused time in a retreat to think about our effectiveness in the past year, and to make plans for our efforts for the next year. This year, the board will spend some time dealing with the fundamental issue of what our Chamber needs to be in 2007 and going forward.

In the past, chambers were the principle organization in a community that helped create what we call a quality of life. They also were the organization that was looked to for economic development. In our own case we can proudly point over the past 75 years to spearheading the installation of the our city's sewer system, promoting turning Freeman Field into an industrial park after World War II, the cleanup of Seymour Recycling Corp., getting a fifth lane through town on U.S. 50, the major facelift of our downtown in the late-1980s and creating the Oktoberfest, Leadership Jackson County and the Community Foundation of Jackson County.

But now with organizations like Main Street, the Visitors Center, and Jackson County Industrial Development Corp., the Chamber's role is one of support or partner rather than being the only one working on an issue. We are blessed to have these, and other, outstanding organizations that have the focused approach and proven success that they have demonstrated in helping create the county we enjoy.

In short, a chamber that is operating the way it did even 10 years ago is an out-of-date Chamber. Just as the times change, so must a chamber. A chamber must decide if it will primarily spend its

energies on seminars, check recovery, events and Adopt-a-Spots to enhance the quality of life, or throw its resources at major projects that no other organization can do as well. Can it do both? Those decisions will determine the budget of a Chamber, and thus its mission. For a chamber, mission and budget are a catch-22 or a chicken-and-egg thing. Which one drives the other, and which comes first? In today's world of competing requests for support, a chamber cannot assume its past financial resources. There are only so many dollars to go around in a community and today there are more hands out wanting some of them than ever before.

No, we're not going to take a year off - we can't. We're too busy. There are too many important projects being worked on, and there are others that are critical to our growth over the next 25 years that need to be. My guess is that just as the chamber has done occasionally over the past 75 years, we are about to go through a change that, like all change, will be uncomfortable for some - but worth it in the long run for both the chamber and the county.

Thanks to all our members, both present and past, who have given us 75 years to serve Seymour and Jackson County. We look forward to many, many more.