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A Different Kind of Candidate School

Alexandria, VA -

One chamber forgoes training candidate about “how to run” and focuses on “what the issues are”

By Cathy Lada

September 2005

“For the first time this year, we put on a Public Service Seminar for anyone interested in running for public office,” says Bruce Bohrer, Senior Vice President for Public Policy at the Lincoln (NE) Chamber of Commerce. Seven candidates for elected office attended the chamber’s inaugural 2005 program. “The primary purpose was to cut through the clutter of rhetoric you always get during campaigns and have control of telling our story about the positive role we play.”

The chamber issued an “opportunities agenda” during the seminar and invited its community partners, such as the local utilities and university and K-12 representatives, to make presentations about critical community issues. The agenda focuses on the chamber’s plans for economic development, public policy agenda, the strategic plan for the CVB, and the partnership work the chamber is involved in, from the city, to the airport and university, to the schools and utility companies.

“Strictly speaking,” says Bohrer, “it was not a political training institute that talked about the nuts and bolts of winning campaigns, but this seminar benefited us in getting our agenda in front of candidates in a very positive way. We wanted candidates to feel free to

question the agenda, provide alternatives, and have a dialogue on how to best continue to move our community forward.”

Bohrer believes that his community’s elected officials appreciated their putting the program together as well as their willingness to put the chamber’s agenda in writing. “They feel like it was a positive experience that helped them with a better understanding of what it takes to be an elected official and with a comfort level working with the Chamber and our various departments.”

But, what’s the carrot that enticed elected officials and candidates to come to the chamber’s issue briefing? Bohrer attributes his program’s success to several factors, including an overwhelming community desire for an end to their politicians’ infighting and a beginning to working together effectively. “We very actively promoted the need for consensus builders as part of our Opportunities Agenda,” says Bohrer. “This polled very well with the public, as did our Chamber’s image and credibility in the community.”

“I believe this was one of the main enticements for candidates to be involved in the seminar. Sure, they wanted to know about the role we played, but they also simply wanted to be seen as being interested in working with us to move forward on the jobs and investment agenda we had developed,” says Bohrer.

The Public Service Seminar was a tremendous success both in attracting the chamber’s community partners to present their work in cooperation with the chamber, and informing candidates about how the Chamber and its partners work with elected officials. “We had very positive feedback,” says Bohrer. “The key measure of success was that we saw a slate of pro-Chamber, pro-business city council candidates elected.”

Another factor that will influence the future success not only of the program but in maintaining the chamber’s solid, professional working relationships with their elected officials is the ongoing attention paid to the chamber’s agenda. The Lincoln chamber has monthly “Council Coffees” with the City Council.

“Our “Opportunities Agenda” is discussed at nearly every meeting,” says Bohrer. “We review the 10 imperatives for Lincoln’s future and continue to work with elected officials on getting all the agenda items completed. Three months after the elections, we have almost all of the items checked off, including an agreement on a city audit function within the city and a streamlining audit for our development process.”

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