

## Post-recession chamber fine-tunes its vision Economy has changed much over the past six years

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COEUR d'ALENE - Think of 2007, and you smile.

Economists have pinpointed that year as the pinnacle of one of the most prosperous periods in the history of our nation. Some have declared that U.S. economy among the three or four most robust in the annals of civilization.

Locally, the good times could hardly have been better. In a bricks and mortar testament to the optimism of the day, the Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce flung open the doors of its brand new building across the street from the lake and the Coeur d'Alene Resort, right where tourists and retail merge.

That was September 2007, exactly six years ago.

"It certainly put bright lights and attention on an organization that for years had been very difficult to find," Steve Wilson, the chamber's president and CEO since November 2011, said in a one-on-one interview with The Press this week. Wilson noted that in its new location, the chamber welcomes 35,000 to 38,000 visitors a year - 10 times the visitorship of the previous facility on 3rd Street.

But September 2007 proved to be a cliff with a tantalizing view - and a long way to fall.

Before the cheering had time to die down, the economy nosedived. Some of the chamber's members wouldn't survive. Most who did would have to buck up and cut back. As much as anything, the chamber offers an accurate reflection of that staggering tumble and the economic resurrection process still under way.

"We try to focus on the positives when the last five, six years were not the best of economic times," Wilson said. "Our approach was to take the high road and be celebratory of the businesses that are still active and viable and doing well, and this building is a mark of a vibrant economy. It's a statement to Coeur d'Alene's will to be competitive and to focus on the positive, on quality and excellence and doing well.

"We're very future-focused. We have a vision of providing visionary leadership. This building is a physical statement to that effect."

But that physical statement also embodies some telling numbers. The new facility's mortgage is three times the previous location's rent; a challenge made greater by the fact that chamber membership has slid from almost 1,300 to just over 1,100.

Construction trades and real estate agents took the hardest hits in membership, Wilson said. The only sector that's seen significant growth since the recession?

"The nonprofit sector is going up," Wilson said. "The reason it's going up is they find it an attractive marketing tool to reach the business community they're looking for."

While nonprofits are seeking businesses that will help them raise funds, Wilson sees irony in that membership trend.

"As the leading business organization, oddly enough, 10 percent of our membership is nonprofit," he said.

He's not complaining. Even though nonprofits receive roughly a 40 percent discount on dues, they're valued members - as are all the others.

"We are a chamber that's tried deeply to understand the economic problems of the last five years," Wilson said. "We've tried to be sensitive to the economic conditions and the effect the economy has had over the last several years on our businesses."

One of the ways the chamber responded is by keeping its dues low. A basic membership for a small business is \$345 annually. That compares, Wilson said, to \$685 in Boise, \$575 in Spokane Valley and \$600 in Missoula.

"Maybe I drank my own Kool-Aid, but the chamber today is more active, more vibrant, more engaged and a louder spokesperson than it was six years ago, and six years ago we had 18 full-time employees," Wilson said. "Today we have nine.

"To some degree, we did upgrade our image but we didn't get fat and sassy. We got lean and mean like all our member businesses did."

The leaner, meaner Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce is firmly focused on two areas of increasing importance, Wilson said: economic development and education, which aren't mutually exclusive. Wilson, a staunch supporter of Coeur d'Alene's 2030 visioning process, has seen early data and believes it offers some direction.

"I think we're going to see a significant gap between how much citizens value a good-wage job and diversity of jobs, and the way they rate Coeur d'Alene as offering good wages and diversification of jobs," he said. "I think you're going to see a very significant gap: 'Value, how important is it to me? Extremely important. How are we doing? Not doing too good.'

"That has to be addressed. It's got to be a focus. In focusing on that, I think we'll also see a correlation to the need for improving educational systems."

Wilson noted the similarities between per capita student expenditures and livable wages in Idaho, both among the lowest in the nation.

"I'm going to make a bold statement that they're very related," he said. "We as a community and as business leaders need to step up and ring that bell to invest in education."

On the immediate horizon, the chamber is leading the charge toward greater emphasis on economic development and education - quite literally on a trip to Edmonton. With Jobs Plus, Inc., Panhandle Area Council and others, a North Idaho contingent will make what Wilson calls "an exploratory trip" Oct. 27-29.

"It's an economy that is superheated," he said of the Edmonton area. "They have enormous industrial growth and development taking place; they have enormous needs for labor and materials. Some of those materials could potentially be produced down here by existing companies and shipped 600 miles."

Another possibility: Canadian companies open branch offices down here, where North Idahoans do the work and ship the products. As one example of economic development and education merging, Wilson cited demand for welders in Edmonton.



SHAWN GUST/Press

Post-recession chamber fine-tunes its vision  
Steve Wilson, president and CEO of the Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce, shows visitors the 1,650 square feet of office space now available for lease in the downstairs section of the chamber building in the heart of downtown Coeur d'Alene.

"They have to pay \$80 an hour for a welder, and at that they can't get people to stay there long," he said.

Welding requirements are more stringent there, Wilson said, but it could pay big dividends if North Idaho welders were trained to meet Canadian standards.

"What they'd like is to say, 'Hey, send us some welders,'" Wilson said. Instead, Wilson said the North Idaho contingent's message could be, let us certify welders and create capital investment down here to do the work.

"That way, they'd get products cheaper and we'd drive our wages higher," he said.

The Coeur d'Alene Chamber isn't going to get away from some of the innovative, non-dues revenue it relies on, like travel programs around the world. But the chamber of today and tomorrow is building a business plan that it believes will help not just its members, but the community and the region. And that, he believes, starts with education.

"In 2007 we were sort of tourism oriented and networking driven," Wilson said. "We weren't focusing on addressing issues that are important in the community like education is. We're engaging members to become activists in education. We as a community and business leaders need to step up and ring that bell to invest in education."