METRO EAST AREA DEVELOPMENT

Group Effort: Council Working Quietly To Bring Jobs Home

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Editor's note: This story ran in some editions last Sunday.

"Get a job!" implores the rock group Sha Na Na. It's easy for those folks to say because they already have a job singing it.

"I'll work to bring in more jobs," promises just about every political candidate, who of course is interested first in getting elected to one.

"Job (n.) A specific piece of work, as in one's trade, or done by agreement for pay," explains Webster's New World Dictionary.

That's the simple part about jobs. The hard part is finding a way to create them. Few are involved. Many are affected. Few have as many recent successes as a relatively obscure Metro East area endeavor called Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois.

From Gateway International Raceway to MidAmerica Airport to Gateway Commerce Center, the effects of Leadership Council's groundwork are sprouting on turf in St. Clair and Madison counties that developers used to ignore.

The council has 124 members, limited to invited top executives of industry, labor, education and government.

Its leaders say it is less oriented to members' whims than traditional chambers of commerce and not involved in the philanthropies of Civic Progress, the otherwise-similar elite gathering of St. Louis CEOs.

John Baricevic, familiar to many as chairman of the St. Clair County Board, is on the Leadership Council. So is Robert Wydra, familiar to fewer as general manager of the Tri-City Port District. Willie Nelson — the banker, not the singer — is a member.

The group has even heeded the widely advertised challenge to know Jack Schmitt, the car dealer. He's a member too.

Their power rests in nothing as much as their relationships. In a world where success is often assumed to be "not what you know but who you know," collectively these people know everybody.



Pennekamp

That network is the key to their success. They can magnify each other's strengths. They can get calls answered and remembered by the simple virtue of their individual job titles.

For example, the Leadership Council wants another Mississippi River bridge at St. Louis to ease congestion.

Republican legislators would find it hard to ignore Robert Walters, director of the Southwestern Illinois Industrial Association. Democrats might be more swayed by Ron Shevlin, business manager of the Twelve Counties Southwestern Illinois Laborers District Council. The nonpartisan council delivers both.

Jim Squires, general manager of Granite City Steel, might want to sound an idea off somebody at Illinois Power Co. He probably will see Otis Cowan, the utility's regional manager for East St. Louis, at next month's breakfast meeting.

Leonard Boyer, director of the Southern Illinois Builders Association, might never have another occasion to visit with Southwestern Illinois Building and Construction Trades Council director Tadas Kicielinski — except maybe over heated contract negotiations.

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While the looseness of the network encourages friendship and respect, a system of rigid committees and narrowly drawn goals moves things swiftly.

"I am driven to see action," said Nancy Belck, chancellor of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and unpaid president of the Leadership Council. "We have such a tangible agenda. That's what excites me about the Leadership Council. It has solid goals."

Extension of MetroLink farther into Illinois is one. So is upgrading the increasingly gridlocked narrow passages of Illinois Route 159 through Edwardsville and Glen Carbon. Others include a better Route 3 link from Venice to Sauget and the success of the nearly built MidAmerica Airport outside Mascoutah.

Leadership Council led the improbably successful mission to rescue the Army's Charles Melvin Price Support Center in Granite City from the 1995 list of military bases to be closed. The council also worked mightily to keep Scott Air Force Base off the list.

Jim Pennekamp, who as executive director is one of just five employees, said council members have one thing in common: "They are inclined to ask, 'What can I do for you?' not 'What can you do for me?' "

In the end, of course, the rising tide they create lifts all their boats. Today's push for a bridge is another day's construction project and a later day's factory and eventually somebody's customer for electricity and telephone service.

And in every case it means more employment.

The St. Louis region had a net increase of 54,000 jobs over the last four years, and the fifth-best performance in job creation for 1994 to 1996 among the nation's top 33 metropolitan areas, said Richard C.D. Fleming, head of the Regional Commerce & Growth Association.

"Part of the reason is that the region is working together, and I give a lot of credit to the Leadership Council and its members," Fleming said.

There is no specific list of jobs attributable to Leadership Council's efforts. One reason is that it cannot — and does not try to — work alone.

By pressing for an extension of Interstate 255 northward to Alton, the council may one day make it easier for the local River Bend Growth Association to sell its community to developers. Who will get the applause? Pennekamp said it should not matter.

Michael Towerman, vice president of Thomas Development Co. in St. Louis, said the council played a crucial role in cutting red tape and making it possible to land construction of the region's largest warehouse — to be occupied by Dial Corp. — within months of the announcement of Gateway Commerce Center outside Granite City.

"I can't say it wouldn't have happened without them, but the Leadership Council helped a lot," said Towerman, who accepted an invitation to join its ranks.

Chris Pook, whose Grand Prix Association of Long Beach brought big-time auto racing to the rebuilt Gateway International in Madison, said earlier this year that the council's work put his project on a fast track.

The Leadership Council strives to be a touchstone for such outsiders who may be daunted by the patchwork of local jurisdictions and chambers of commerce that serve the more than 500,000 people who live in the two counties.

Said Robert Wetzel, chairman of the council and president of the Bank of Edwardsville: "We provide a focus, a cohesiveness that was not there before."

That is what people like Carl Mathias of Illinois Power Co., Ralph Korte of the construction company that bears his name, Jim O'Flynn of the RCGA and Earl Lazerson, then president of SIUE, had in mind when they helped form the council 14 years ago.

It remains relatively lean, using less than $200,000 a year in dues to pay for operations and depending heavily on its members to support specific projects. The council recently asked its members' employers to chip in $1.26 million for a fund to defend Scott against future rounds of base closings and for other projects.

In its role as job creator, the council provided several for Pennekamp, its director: ambassador, mediator, fundraiser, speechmaker — even choir director. "I try," he sighed, "to keep everybody singing out of the same hymnal."

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