

DAILY PILOT

Commentary: Newport Beach chamber is making progress on membership

By Tim Brown

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First, let me begin by stating the following comments reflect my own personal observations. They should not be attributed to anyone else who serves on the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce (NBCC) Board of Directors or any member of the NBCC staff.

In recent days, the NBCC has been criticized on a number of fronts by journalists doing their job in keeping the public informed about trusted civic institutions. As is usually the case, some of this criticism is justified and some of it is not. Despite their best efforts to investigate prior to publishing, columnists are always on the outside looking in.

To clarify, the NBCC is a not-for-profit institution dependent on the annual dues of its members (primarily small local businesses) to pay its bills. The economic downturn, which began in 2007, has had a profoundly negative impact on small business owners, many of whom have been unable to weather the storm and have had to close their doors.

Others, although they have been able to remain open, have had to make choices between making payroll and paying their NBCC dues. Others have looked closely at the value proposition currently offered by the NBCC membership and have decided that, in these difficult times, the return on investment is just not there. All of these are factors that have led to a decline in the NBCC membership over the past five years. Admittedly, the NBCC has been slow to react to these forces thus creating some of the financial challenges it faces today.

The Taste of Newport was created to showcase our local restaurants and has been enormously profitable over the years. That success made it easier to permit the overhead of the NBCC to exceed what its membership could support. Of course in hindsight, it is easy to point out that that decision was ill-advised. That phenomenon, coupled with the maturing of the event, has caused some to question the wisdom of continuing to produce

the Taste of Newport. The fact is until this past year, the Taste of Newport has brought hundreds of thousands of dollars to the NBCC, which in-turn has funded grants to many important civic organizations like Leadership Tomorrow. The financial loss this year clearly indicates the event should be re-imagined before going forward, and it will be.

It is true that the NBCC has been looking at a new home for the Citizen of the Year Gala. Staff reductions resulting from the drop in membership created a need to look at all of the NBCC events and be sure each was consistent with the NBCC mission. Of all the events the NBCC supports, it was determined that this one might be enhanced if placed in a new home. It is also true that discussions went too far with the Friends of the Oasis before there was thoughtful consideration of other options. However, to release the event to the Friends of Oasis knowing that there were other alternatives yet to be considered would have been irresponsible on the part of the NBCC and a disservice to all of the former winners of this prestigious title, and who look forward to this event each year. Even if there is no winner for 2012, I am confident this event will go forward in 2013.

All of us should keep in mind that the NBCC and all its members past and present have served this community for more than 105 years. Very few organizations, dependent on volunteers, can boast such longevity. That service has been unselfishly extended by legions of Newport Beach citizens, for no other reason than civic pride, not only to the business community, but to seasonal visitors, the Police and Fire departments, the scholars and athletes attending our local high schools and much more.

Few residents are even aware that it is volunteers of the NBCC that put on the Christmas Boat Parade, the annual economic forecast, recognize police and firefighters for risking their lives to keep all of us safe, act as mentors for students in our local schools, and recognize graduating seniors for their outstanding accomplishments to name just a few.

Right now, we are facing some challenges, and yes, some of them are self-inflicted, but we will maximize what we learn as a result and remodel ourselves into a much more focused and nimble organization. In addition, we will develop partnerships with other civic institutions, so we can all better serve the Newport Beach business community at a time when it needs us the most. In the coming weeks and months, look for important announcements regarding our progress to remake ourselves into an organization that continues to justify the confidence placed in us by all of you.

TIM BROWN is chairman of the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.