

DAILY PILOT

Chamber names Rosansky interim CEO

Though the organization has gone through a difficult period, it 'is not going anywhere,' he says.

By Jill Cowan

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Former Newport Beach Mayor Steve Rosansky took on the role of interim president and chief executive of the Chamber of Commerce this week, following the retirement of longtime CEO Richard Luehrs.

"I'm flattered that I was asked to do it because I perceive the chamber as being one of our most important institutions in town," Rosansky said Friday. "It's a little bit of an affirmation of the time I spent on the City Council."

Rosansky sat on the dais for nine years representing West Newport in District 2 and was termed out in December. He served as mayor for one term.

A Newport resident of nearly three decades, Rosansky was chosen to lead the chamber at "a critical time," according to an email chamber board chairman Tim Brown sent to members Friday.

Luehrs retirement comes as the chamber searches for a more sustainable business model in the face of economic challenges in recent years.

The job is a "volunteer position," Brown wrote. The board expects to appoint a permanent leader within six months, the email said.

But Rosansky said he's up for whatever the business climate throws his way during that time. He doesn't plan to seek the permanent CEO position, he said.

"There are going to be some changes," he said. "Definitely going to be some changes for the better."

Among them, Rosansky said, could be to "slim down" the 105-year-old organization, which leaders have said is going through a rough transitional period.

Like so many other industries, the "value proposition" of a chamber as an informational source on local businesses has largely shifted to the Internet, he said.

"It used to be that 30 or 40 years ago, if you needed a plumber, you called the chamber of commerce," Rosansky said. "My son, who's 28, would never call the chamber of commerce for that. That traditional thing has gone by the wayside, and we need to find other ways of providing value to our members."

Furthermore, he said, the down economy has caused a decline in membership, as struggling businesses pared down to the bare essentials.

Rosansky said he's planning a retreat for early February to brainstorm possible solutions.

Right now, he said, the chamber likely will evaluate the events it sponsors to see if other organizations might be able to take them on instead.

And while he said there aren't any plans for the chamber and Newport's marketing arm, Visit Newport Beach, to merge, he said the two groups are looking into "synergies that might exist."

For example, Visit Newport Beach, as a purely marketing entity, may be able to secure bigger sponsors for some of the events the chamber usually runs, he said.

Both groups, Rosansky said, are working toward the goals of promoting the city and creating a unified brand.

He added that while critics pointed to the chamber's lack of a citizen of the year award in 2012 as a sign of its impending demise, the chamber will choose a Newport resident for the prize by late April.

"The chamber is not going anywhere," he said.

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