



Should chambers of commerce endorse candidates?

Move gaining popularity but still can be controversial

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Chambers of commerce are meant to further the interests of the local business community, but does endorsing political candidates fall within that mission?

The chambers that do it are still in the minority, however, the practice may be growing as the national economic climate has soured, experts said.

But candidate endorsements are not without controversy, as was borne out in last week's ouster of Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce President Frank Elias.

Elias has said publicly that the endorsements have become a divisive issue in the organization, and has alleged that his opinion is part of the reason he was fired.

Other chamber officials deny that's the case, but the issues Elias raises highlight both the benefits and the pitfalls of the practice.

Some experts and chamber officials say that endorsements serve as a tool to help bring about business-friendly policies.

Others say endorsements can backfire if the chosen candidate loses the election, and can cause divisions within chambers if members have different views about candidates.

About one-third of chambers in the state endorse candidates, Chamber Alliance of New York State Chairman Rob Robinson estimated.

"Every individual chamber looks at it differently," said Robinson, who is the head of the Otsego County Chamber, which does not endorse.

Local controversy

Elias said endorsements had caused strife in his organization.

"We've got a board of 24 people," Elias said. "It's almost impossible to get 24 people with diverse backgrounds to agree."

The 2010 election cycle is a case in point. In the same week that the chamber announced its endorsement of Republican Greg Johnson for the 116th District Assembly seat, more than 30 businesses announced they would endorse Democratic incumbent RoAnn Destito.

Just this week, the chamber endorsed Democrat Anthony Brindisi, who is running against Johnson in a special election to replace Destito, who recently took a position in the administration of Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Chamber Board Chairman Sam Berardino declined to comment for this story, but referred the O-D to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

J.P. Fielder of the U.S. Chamber said his organization "values its role in the political debate, especially right now in the economic crisis" and endorses federal level candidates.

Fielder added that unions and other groups with an interest in shaping policy also endorse candidates.

Berardino later issued a statement within a press release endorsing Brindisi.

"The chamber goal is not to favor any political party, but rather a philosophy that will support pro-business state policy," he said.

Differing views

Some members of the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce had differing views on the practice.

Dean Kelly, who is president of Jay-K Independent Lumber in New Hartford, said he agreed with the endorsement process.

"Decisions these candidates make in office greatly affect local businesses," he said.

The endorsements also give the chamber a way to hold candidates accountable, because if they don't follow through on their promises, they may lose the endorsement next time, he said.

But Mary Jo Beach, vice president and general manager of Townsquare Media, said she didn't believe the chamber should endorse.

"They are making a judgment call for everyone who is a member of the chamber, and I don't feel they have a right to do that," she said.

"It's not good for the chamber if the person they are endorsing doesn't get in," she said. "They should be Switzerland."

Lawyer J.K. Hage said that though people in the business community hold differing views on issues, there are core themes that are important to all businesses and the endorsements are valid.

“New York state is a poster child for government hostility to business,” he said, noting high taxes and the tough regulatory climate.

A growing trend

Candidate endorsements are not the norm nationwide, but the practice is gaining ground, said Mick Fleming, president of American Chamber of Commerce Executives, a nationwide association representing chamber executives.

“There was a time when essentially buying access with undying loyalty to incumbents was helpful,” Fleming said. “Lately, there has been a realization that being at the table is not enough.”

The economy’s slide has spurred chambers nationwide to try to influence the political process so that business-friendly candidates are elected, he said.

The Rochester Business Alliance, a chamber of commerce in that city, has a rigorous endorsement process, spokeswoman Ellen Rosen said.

“We endorse in races where we feel the people running have an opportunity to shape policies that affect our members,” she said. “Our members rely on the chamber of commerce to be their voice, to connect them to people who make decisions. Endorsement can be a very powerful tool for sharing that voice.”

In Syracuse, the Center State Corporation for Economic Opportunity, which offers chamber services, stopped endorsing a year ago.

“We need to work with both sides of the aisle,” said the organization’s Director of Communications Christa Glazier.

The organization does political advocacy work to further its goals, and has a lobbyist on staff who works with both parties, Glazier said.

The decision not to endorse was made when the organization was founded after a merger between the Syracuse Chamber of Commerce and the Metropolitan Development Association. The chamber had endorsed but the Development Association had not, Glazier said.

Robinson of the Chamber Alliance of New York State said Elias was correct about the possibility of divisiveness surrounding endorsements.

“Getting involved in endorsing candidates is controversial and will win you as many members as it will lose you, depending on who you endorse and how you endorse them,” he said.