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INDUSTRY FOCUS

Under Doris Carson Williams' watch, the African American Chamber raises its membership voice and the community listens

Getting down to business

By TIM SCHOOLEY

In an hourlong interview, Doris Carson Williams seems to visit as many places in her standard-size office as her organization has members.

That would total almost 330. That's the number of members of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, a membership base Ms. Williams has helped to grow from a starting point of 50 members when she started as chamber president in 1998.

As she buzzes around her office from her desk, to her fax machine, to the neatly aligned picture frames posed on her windowsill, Ms. Williams veers from one example of her organization's growth to the next.

"Doris has incredible energy," said Jane Downing, senior program officer for The Pittsburgh Foundation, a funder of the AACC. She credits Ms. Williams with playing a major role in the chamber's larger than expected growth:

■ AT A GLANCE

African American Chamber of Commerce

■ **President:** Doris Carson Williams

■ **Chairman:** Robert Agbede

■ **Headquarters:** Regional Enterprise Tower

■ **Number of members:** 330

"I think Doris has provided the day-to-day energy and the wherewithal to make it happen."

With a growing schedule of events, and key programs for mentoring and energy brokering under development, the chamber's membership growth remains the benchmark of its growing clout.

"It gives us a strong voice," Ms. Williams said of the membership base. "We can actually speak for a segment of the small business community. That we couldn't do in the past."

The chamber's membership has

grown faster than projected. As Ms. Downing recalled, the goal when The Pittsburgh Foundation first made its multiyear grant to the chamber was to grow the membership from 120 members in 1999 to 200 in three years.

Instead, the chamber exceeded that goal by almost 130. Ms. Williams now expects the organization to reach 375 members by the end of the year.

A growing membership is also beginning to pay off substantially in the value of the contracts the chamber has helped to facilitate. In the past two and a half years, Ms. Williams has tracked about \$200 million in awarded contracts the chamber helped to facilitate.

She admits that trying to quantify such business can be an elusive task. While bids on the kinds of public contracts for jobs needed filled by publicly funded institutions, such as the Community College of Allegheny

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Photo by DON SCOTT

ENERGIZING FORCE: In addition to growing the membership at the African American Chamber of Commerce, Doris Carson Williams also has helped to facilitate about \$200 million in awarded contracts.

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County and the University of Pittsburgh, are made through the chamber, private sector contracts are not.

And it's difficult to quantify the amount of business conducted informally through chamber events such as its regular power breakfasts.

Regardless of the numbers, the key for the chamber now is to take its growing membership and connect it with the broader business community.

"My expectations when I first started was to create an environment that would allow the corporate community to have access to African-American businesses," said Ms. Williams. "My goal was to provide a vehicle that they could not only find them, but do business with them."

In a city in which cronyism remains common enough, there are still barriers for African-American businesses looking to grow new business.

Minority exclusion from the Plan B projects remain a recent memory. But other major ventures have helped African-American businesses grow and find greater opportunities in the city.

They include such initiatives as Project Nehemiah's development at East Gate, an East Hills project to build a new Lowes Home Improvement Center on a site bordering the city, Penn Hills and Wilkinsburg. The Manchester Craftsmen's Guild's plan

to build a \$4 million commercial greenhouse specializing in the growth of orchids is another.

And the chamber also helped to facilitate contract awards for such projects as the UPMC Sports Medicine complex on the South Side.

"I think what Doris has done has, in fact, raised the visibility of the African-American business community within the region," said Ms. Downing. "I think the growth in membership and the attendance at her power breakfasts demonstrates that there is a larger and stronger minority business community here than I think most have been aware of."

With attendance increasing at such events, there is still more potential for the chamber to grow. Representing all of Western Pennsylvania from Erie down to Pittsburgh, Ms. Williams estimated the chamber had a pool of about 1,600 potential members.

Bill Strickland, an early member of the chamber and founder of the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, believes Ms. Williams deserves much of credit for the organization's growth.

"She brings acumen, she brings sophistication, she brings a strategic sense of how to build the organization, which has resulted in a several hundred percent worth of growth in the last year or 18 months," he said.

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