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ADVOCATE—As co-chair of Pittsburgh 21, Doris Carson Williams gave chamber members a voice in city government.

Taking care of business

African American Chamber continues to grow and advocate for members

by Scot L. M. Toler

Courier Staff Writer

Four years ago when Doris Carson Williams became the head of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Southwestern Pennsylvania, the organization had a mere 50 members. It had no voice.

Now, with its membership numbers approaching 400 busi-

nesses, organizations and professionals, the so-called "Black Chamber" is growing in clout.

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

To hear Williams tell it, the organization's 2002 accomplishments began "before 2001 was even over."

"Just before the year concluded, the African American Chamber of Commerce led the charge to urge county council to vote down the Living Wage Bill," Williams said.

County council rejected the bill, which would have re-

quired the county and its contractors to pay employees a minimum \$9.12 per hour.

At the time, council President Jim Simms said, "As budget chairman, when I began to examine the ramifications—looking at a \$30 million budget deficit—we don't have the money to pass on these costs," he said. "If we can't pay for it, we shouldn't promise it."



AGREDE

Simms was the original sponsor of the bill. The year actually began with chamber members learning of business opportunities with Citizens Bank at the first power breakfast of the year. Bank Chairman Stephen Steinhour was the guest speaker.

An accomplishment that may have gone unnoticed by the general community was the local chamber assisting the start up of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Central Pennsylvania.

In February, the chamber

continued its political advocacy on a different level by hosting a candidates forum for the highly contested Pittsburgh City Council race in District 9. Former Councilwoman Valerie McDonald Roberts vacated the seat to take a county row office seat as reorder of deeds.

The second month of the year also saw the chamber focusing on promoting social events for members to relax and network. Playwright/director Jazewell Thompson visited a power breakfast to inform members of his upcoming play "Constant Star" on the life of the late newspaper editor and civil and women's rights advocate, Ida B. Wells. The chamber would later host a performance of the play at the City Theatre.

"We capped the night off with sweet rewards at dessert reception," Williams remarked.

Another February event was a skating day at the new Ice Rink at PPG Place.

"We will do it again next year, so don't miss the date," Williams informed members at the annual business meeting and luncheon.

In April, Morgan Stanley



THANKS, BILL—The chamber saluted retiring Congressman Bill Coyne, right. Also shown from left: Pittsburgh Councilwoman Twanda Carlisle, NAACP Pittsburgh Branch President Tim Stevens, Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds Valerie McDonald Roberts and Doris Carson Williams.

hosted a networking mixer for the chamber at the new Renaissance Hotel.

"The highlight of that month was our statewide candidates forum," Williams said. "The event, hosted by the chamber was televised state wide and included our Gov.-elect Ed Rendell. It also featured the candidates for the state House of Representatives."

"For the past 15 years, chamber member Bill Robinson has been in the forefront of supporting small and minority businesses in Harrisburg," she continued. "He has been a pillar of strength for the chamber, we thank him and wish him well in his future endeavors."

Robinson lost his re-election bid to political newcomer Jake Whealey, who will be sworn in to office in January.

On the health front, the chamber teamed with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in April to provide information to its members about the importance of cancer

Board Chairman Robert Agbade said the chamber will become a stronger advocate for its members in the new year. "We'll try to encourage those who work with us to continue and get more involved," said Agbade. "And for those who don't work with us, we'll try to find ways to involve them."

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Additionally, he said the chamber will work on compiling its first ever report card listing the top company that works with Black-owned businesses and hire Black professionals.

Agbede said Black businesses are still recovering from being excluded from Plan B (the building boom in the city that saw the erection of two new sports stadiums and a new convention center among).

"We have to find ways to build lasting capacity, not just some instant gratification," he said.

As a result of its advocacy work thus far, which includes the establishment of a mentorship program, the chamber was nominated by National City Bank as Small Business Advocate of the Year for the Eastern Region of the Small Business Administration. It won the award in May.

The June Powerbreakfast served as an opportunity to salute retiring Congressman Bill Coyne.

That month's networking event had chamber members doing business to the rhythm

of steel drums, during an event hosted by Agbede.

Networking is vital to chamber members. Therefore, a meeting was held in August to inform members how to maximize networking opportunities.

Dominion Peoples followed up that meeting by hosting a corporate networking mixer at the John Heinz History Center in September.

Then, in November, a special chamber luncheon was held at which Roger Ferguson, the vice chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, spoke about the economy and "the outlook of money matters affecting the African-American community," as Williams explained it. Williams also gave Black businesses and professionals a voice in formation of the city's budget proposal as co-chair of Pittsburgh 21, a task force formed by Mayor Tom Murphy to suggest ways to balance the city's operational budget.

"The chamber has come a long way," Agbede said, "but we're not there yet. We're just scratching the surface. The best is yet to come."