

Choosing chambers

More options available for businesses seeking networking and support

By Tim Krohn

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MANKATO — Businesses have more chambers of commerce to choose from as a recently launched regional chamber grows and a new for-profit chamber has started in Mankato.

The groups join the well-established and largest chamber — Greater Mankato Growth — in trying to attract members.

While none of the leaders of the three groups are critical of the others, the organizations clearly set up some competition. And the newcomers arrive as GMG (www.greatermankato.com) has set an aggressive membership drive.

Shannon Ballman recently started a for-profit Main Street Chamber chapter in Mankato, which she says is a no-cost way

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for small-business owners to get personal networking and support.

“ Every business gets a free membership and events are all free. We have companies that will sponsor and cover costs of events,” said Ballman, who also owns a home-office based business called Payroll Solutions Plus.

Main Street Chamber (www.my.mainstreetchamber.org/Mankato) is a nationwide business.

People can open and own a local chapter for a fee of between \$ 12,000 and \$ 52,000 based on the population of the area, according to the group's website.

The website offers a variety of online information for small businesses.

Ballman said the main aim of the Mankato chapter is to provide networking events for business owners.

“ I'm doing it for people who can't afford to pay to join these other groups but need to network. You just invest your time. When you're getting started, you have a little bit of time and no money.”

Ballman said a grand opening event drew 60 people and she so far has 148 members.

Her network events feature booths from a variety of business sponsors and members can mix with each other and the sponsors.

Jonathan Zierdt, president of Greater Mankato Growth local chamber and economic development group, views the Main Street Chamber as providing just a sliver of what GMG offers members.

“ What they offer is one of the things GMG offers. I don’t think people would view them as offering the traditional services of a chamber.”

He said GMG members have asked him about the new group and he’s provided information on what they do but doesn’t make a recommendation on whether anyone should join or not.

“ We’d never tell a member whether they should be a part of or join any group.

That’s just another of many choices businesses have to make every day.”

Meanwhile, the Chamber of Commerce of Southern Minnesota is set up as a traditional nonprofit chamber but targets a large swath of south- central Minnesota.

The group started in late 2010 and has 40 plus business members, including large corporations such as Taylor Corp., said CCSM President Brad Berg.

“ We’re in addition to the local chambers. What we’re trying to do is network people from a wide area.

We’re trying to get the small towns to work with each other and with the hubs,” said Berg, who is based in Truman.

Berg said the CCSM (www.chambermn.com) especially helps small- town businesses and small communities. “ They need to network with the hubs, like Austin or Mankato or Owatonna.”

The group also puts out a nonprofit business journal, which Berg said gives lower- cost advertising for small businesses. He said they have 20,000 copies that go out across southern Minnesota.

They also have a spin- off organization — Public Private Initiative — which aims to provide economic development for small towns.

“ If a manufacturer contacts Truman and Dubuque and says they’re interested in moving to the area, Dubuque’s going to have a building up for them before Truman can send a response.

“ PPI gives small towns an edge to market and recruit out- of- state businesses. We have a marketing package ready to show the different towns where a company could locate and why they should,” Berg said.

Berg said he doesn’t view his chamber as being in direct competition with GMG.

“ We’re for businesses that want to reach out more regionally.” And, he said, their group will not try to do economic development in the Mankato- St.

Peter- Lake Crystal area.

Zierdt said the CCSM is fashioned as a typical nonprofit chamber. “ They’re serving a regional marketplace.”