

Black business leaders merge to aid start-ups

Michigan Black Chamber of Commerce hopes to be entrepreneurial backbone

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As a state struggling with a 10.6 percent unemployment rate, business usually isn't the first thing associated with Michigan and the Detroit area.

Hoping to change this trend, local entrepreneurs gathered at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History on Feb. 22 to introduce the directors of the newly formed Michigan Black Chamber of Commerce.

The MBCC hopes to aid black-owned corporations by increasing business development and securing partnerships with various corporations. Area business leader Ken Harris will act as president and CEO of the chamber. Harris, who previously served as director of Greek Affairs at Wayne State, plans to advocate policy changes that will help black businesses be more competitive in Michigan's tepid economy.

"The Michigan Black Chamber of Commerce will aggressively advocate for the economic gardening, growth and capacity building of Michigan black-owned businesses," Harris said.

The MBCC will be an affiliate of the National Black Chamber of Commerce which represents more than 1.2 million people and has over 190 chapters across the country. The MBCC is the first statewide black chamber of commerce in Michigan.

The MBCC plans to launch local chambers in at least 10 cities throughout the state which will also include reestablishing the now defunct Detroit chapter.

"We will be strategic partners with the city of Detroit and all local municipalities where we will have a local black chamber of commerce. We plan to have local black chambers throughout Michigan in all urban cities. We support Mayor Dave Bing's vision and we know for certain that black-owned businesses will be a vital aspect of Detroit's economic rebound and revitalization," Harris said.

Ron Busby, president of the National Black Chamber, was also present at the Wright Museum to welcome the new Michigan members.

Busby made clear in his speech that the chamber would advocate not only for large corporations but also for small family owned businesses.

“To help in the pursuit of reviving Michigan’s economy, we are proud to announce the Chamber 100. A culmination of African-American business both in an elite status (as well as) the guy who’s been on Gratiot and 8 Mile for 18 years as a plumber, and he is now transitioning his business over to his grandson,” Busby said.

The “Chamber 100” was a reference to the number of area businesses, which Busby said had already committed support to the MBCC.

Busby also commented on the sense of pride that comes with chamber membership, a sentiment shared by Harris.

“Chamber members are proud to belong to an organization that plays such a key role in the community,” Harris said. “They display their membership logos on their office windows and advertise their membership in their brochures or advertisements.

“Holding a membership in a chamber that is recognized worldwide and part of the U.S. Black Chamber of Commerce allows members to promote to the rest of the country that they belong to something important in the great state of Michigan.”

Planning for the statewide chamber began in 2006. Harris, as well as precursor organization African-American Business Alliance, played the most influential roles in establishing the MBCC. In 2010, the advocacy group focused its efforts on creating a statewide business organization to support black entrepreneurs.

In addition to Harris, the chamber’s directors will include a prominent mix of business men and women including William Brooks (chairman), Charlie Beckham (chairman elect), Pamela Rodgers (vice president), Wayne Phillips (treasurer), Reuben Munday (secretary), Louis Green (state advisor) and Rod Rickman (national advisor).

The MBCC will hold its first public convention on June 23, when it discusses a report of findings on the state of black business in Michigan.