

HARTFORD CHAMBER Q & A

New director talks about the future

Hartford is quickly becoming a city in transition, basically fueled by burgeoning population growth and a healthy manufacturing climate. And with that growth comes attendant feeder businesses like restaurants, hotels and other retail operations — including the granddaddy of them all, Wal-Mart, which has received approval from the city to start construction in the near future. To keep pace with that business growth — and to encourage its continuation in this area of transition — is one of the primary mission of the Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce. To gain insight into how the chamber is approaching these challenges, Times Press staffer Al Dunn interviewed Laurie Barz, the new executive director of the Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce.

TP: How did you get involved with the chamber? What is your background?

LB: *I'm a former small business owner, I had a small construction company, and have always enjoyed being in business and talking about business. I have a master's degree in business administration, and I loved being a capitalist and watching things grow. And I know the struggles. When this position came up I was working as the business service team leader at the Workforce Development Center, and was really looking for the big opportunity. I was looking for the big one. I came and interviewed, and this was it. I think my background and some of the experiences I've had really were almost perfect for this position.*

TP: You've come on board during a time of change in Hartford, the latest big change is the approval of Wal-Mart. What is the chamber's stance on this retail giant coming to town?

LB: *Our mission statement is supporting and nurturing growth in the Hartford area. That's our mission statement. If they are*

indeed coming, and it sounds like they are, then we need to try to make it a positive experience.

TP: How does your membership feel about Wal-Mart coming in?

LB: *I don't know that there's one uniform thought on that. There are positives and negatives, so....*

TP: As a follow to that question, in years past it seems the primary role of a chamber director was as a cheerleader for the existing mom & pop stores. Now it seems more chambers are becoming proactive in building economic growth with a more diverse business community, manufacturing and so forth. What does the chamber do to lure these types of businesses here?

LB: *Well, we've just started developing a marketing plan. In the past, the chamber really focused just on the city and town of Hartford businesses. We have now encompassed the town of Erin and are going to encompass all of the areas that Hartford Union High School uses as feeder schools.*

All those little areas — Herman and Saylesville and some of the areas out west where the Wal-Mart is proposed to go. We hope to grow this community and not just the city and town of Hartford. And to support the businesses that are here.

TP: What is your membership comprised of, number and variety of businesses?

LB: *That's something we're analyzing right now. In the past we've never really looked at the industry types or the make-up codes. We do have a lot of small businesses, but that is consistent with every area. There are more small businesses than there are large businesses. And we hope to be able to support them through mentoring programs. I'm working with the Waukesha County Economic Development Corporation in developing a mentoring program right now for small companies so they can come in and get some help from the chamber. Some real help; some help that's going to help their bottom line. Their return on their investment.*

TP: What is the city doing to attract more industry to Hart-



Amber King/Times Press staff

Laurie Barz is the new executive director of the Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce.

ford?

LB: The industries that are members of the chamber really support the chamber by doing things like offering their employees incentive chamber checks, which helps keep the money inside the city and town of Hartford or in the Hartford area. That's very helpful to us. And I think it's really important and I hope they will continue to support us in that way.

TP: Much has been made of luring some biomedical technology firms — which seem to be booming in the Milwaukee area — out to Washington County. Has the Hartford chamber made any inquiries to these businesses?

LB: *Not at this time. But it's not something we wouldn't consider doing. Because of lack of time we haven't talked about it.*

TP: Health insurance costs are a big concern with most businesses, particularly the smaller employer. Does the

chamber offer a program for its members, if not, what advice do you give them?

LB: *Yes, it offers the Humana Plan. It gives the businesses a 10 percent discount on the premium. You have to have at least two people in your company who are involved, so your sole proprietor wouldn't be eligible for that.*

TP: What is your vision for the Hartford Chamber?

LB: I hope to grow this area. I hope to focus more on business growth. Networking, networking, networking to get business people together so they can exchange ideas and add to their bottom line.

TP: The chamber director's job seems to be pretty all-encompassing and engrossing. What does Laurie Barz do to unwind?

LB: *I sail, I swim. I have a little getaway up in Door County. I garden. I do all the things everyone else does. I have grass to mow and lawn work to do.*