

Chamber Of Commerce Lends Helping Hand

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By ART GILLIAM

THE Memphis city government, in order to be perpetuated at election time, must make an effort to reflect the sentiments of a majority of voters. However, the will of the majority does not always coincide with that which is in the best interest of the city. Therefore, it is sometimes instructive to take direction from organizations which are not directly involved in the political realm. While the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce is not completely independent of local politics, it is,

nonetheless, able to exercise a degree of self-determination, and it emerges with a seemingly different view of community relations.

"The chamber, through its membership, has certainly had some effect on equal opportunity," says Clifford Stockton, manager of the Human Resources Division. "The Human Resources Division is constantly working through the Memphis Employers Merit Employment Association and the National Alliance of Businessmen to create opportuni-

ties for both blue and white collar workers."

Mr. Stockton feels that the main barrier to minority businessmen and enterprises is the unavailability of investable funds. "This barrier has been heightened by the downturn in the economy, not only in Memphis but across the nation as well," he says. "However, the chamber has been designated as the grantee for a one-million-dollar grant to be controlled by a community development corporation. The purpose of this grant is to make venture capital available to minority entrepreneurs."

ODELL HORTON, president of LeMoyné-Owen College, is a member of the chamber board of directors. He believes the chamber has been effective "only in a limited way" in bringing about equal opportunity on a community basis. "Its main effect has been in showing a willingness to help some blacks into business," Mr. Horton says.

He feels that the reasons blacks have largely been excluded from business involve more than just lack of capital and that the correction of injustices will require a definite commitment by the chamber. "The main barriers have been racial discrimination and the unwillingness of people in business to accept blacks in higher economic positions," he says. "To insure fuller participation, the Chamber of

Commerce leadership must recognize that black people desperately need help. And there must be a willingness on the part of chamber members to face that fact and correct historic inequities by whatever means are necessary."

ROBERT ATKINS, associate manager of the chamber's Human Resources Division, believes the chamber will continue its programs aimed at helping blacks and that blacks should reciprocate by cooperating with the chamber. "The chamber has had some effectiveness in bringing about equal employment opportunities, and through its nine divisions it will continue to help blacks become businessmen and find meaningful employment," he says. "The primary objective of any chamber is to create a better way of life for its citizens and blacks can fit into this objective by becoming a part of the chamber and cooperating with its activities."

The Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce is certainly a part of what we loosely term "the establishment." Yet it somehow has managed to escape much of the adherence to tradition that plagues many other elements among the powers that be. Perhaps the reason is that the chamber has only to be concerned with creating a visible, progressive economic situation and not with being re-elected in a community which often balks at progressivism.



"If I let them print the truth about you I'd be their next victim."

C.A.