

Chamber of Commerce Out to Buy Elections

Xue Lor's Facebook post about his City Council candidacy caught my eye.

"My opponent is getting \$6,000 from the Salem Chamber of Commerce. If the private sector is able to buy seats in local government, how can [we] expect democracy to work," he asked.

We can't. So wake up, Salemians.

The spirit of the Koch Brothers — spend big on elections to get a big influence over elected officials — is haunting a city that many people believe still has small town values.

Not when it comes to the Salem Chamber of Commerce's attempts at election-buying.

Recently I heard that when a Monmouth-Independence Chamber of Commerce member was asked if the organization got involved in election endorsements, the answer was "Are you kidding? This is a small place. We all work together."

I wish the Salem Chamber had that attitude. But instead of broadly representing this area's business community, it acts like a narrow special interest group.

Here's the primary thing the Chamber says it cares about: "Will this measure/candidate support or hinder the ability of private sector employers to grow their businesses and create jobs?"

Nothing about quality of life, fiscal responsibility, parks and recreation, good schools, community involvement, open government, a vibrant downtown, and other issues that are vitally important to Salem citizens.

So remember this when you see a City Council candidate has gotten big bucks from the Salem Chamber of Commerce.

Do you want to be represented by someone beholden to the Chamber's Create Jobs PAC, or someone independently minded who cares about the entire community?

Jason Brandt, CEO of the Salem Chamber, responded to Xue. He said, “Hundreds of local small businesses invest in the Chamber to assist candidates they feel are best positioned to strengthen our local economy and bring more jobs to our great city.”

Actually, just a few people in the Chamber decide on endorsements. So “they” in the quote above is just the Create Jobs PAC and Chamber Board of Directors.

What’s going on here is just several Chamber officials deciding on large special interest contributions and endorsements aimed at influencing City Council races. Democracy, be damned.

Xue replied to Brandt with a comment that shows his business savvy: “I believe w/o the citizens, a business is just a building. When citizens are happy, businesses and the community thrive.”

Absolutely. The Chamber has an outmoded view of job creation.

It is pushing a wasteful Third Bridge proposal that would suck \$400 million out of the pockets of taxpayers for an unneeded boondoggle, while wise investments in Salem’s future go unfunded.

Fortunately, there are excellent City Council candidates who understand the truth of what Xue said. We need to make Salem a Happy City that attracts new residents and businesses. In the long-run, jobs are more likely to follow people than the other way around.

Don’t mistake pro-business with getting Chamber PAC money. The best way to grow Salem’s economy is to improve Salem’s overall quality of life.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city’s Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com