

Chamber still going strong after 150 years

Diversity and inclusion are deeply held tenets of city organization



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When James Ashdown, Andrew Bannatyne, Andrew McDermot and others got together to form the Winnipeg Board of Trade on March 8, 1873 it was hardly anything to take issue with that the founders were all middle-aged white men.

But that is ancient history because on its 150th birthday the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce does not look anything like your grandfather's chamber. Diversity and inclusion are not just tag lines at the chamber, they are now deeply held tenets of how the organization should exist.

In fact Loren Remillard, its CEO for the past seven years, said he felt a little awkward attracting attention to the chamber yesterday, not wanting to detract from what is International Women's Day.





Good news for the community and the city.

But, the always sensitive Remillard considered that there might be some karma to it.

“The first 150 years history of the chamber was not one of diversity, equity and inclusion,” he said. “But for the next 150 years that is going to be the strength of the chamber and our members and our community.”

The organization that was formed six months before the legal creation of the City of Winnipeg remains a strong, stable presence for the city's business community, one that now strives to be truly representative of the diversity of the city.

Jessica Dumas, an Indigenous woman, can attest to that. The former chair (2019-2020), who runs a business coaching and mentoring consultancy, said she had to be brave to go to her first chamber meetings because she really didn't have any friends or peers there.

“Last week I attended the mayor's state of the city luncheon and I love how I can walk into the room now and there are groups of Indigenous people there,” she said. “When I started it was not like that. I love how that has changed.”

The chamber has formalized its commitment to diversity equity and inclusion by adopting a program called CODE – Commitment to Opportunity Diversity and Equity — a couple of years ago. Its board and staff are proudly diverse and it taken nothing away from its connection to its 2,000 members that represent every sector of size of business in the city.

“One of our roles is community leadership, well let's lead,” said Remillard. “Sometimes you have to go to spaces where no one else is, but where you know the community needs you to go. So you go there, you clear the path and do the heavy lifting... to make it easier for everyone to follow.”

A recent Probe Research poll showed that more than 75 per cent of Manitoba businesses – not just from Winnipeg — identify the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce as the province's leading business organization, and only 11 per cent of them were actually members.



The 150th anniversary milestone also marks the beginning of the post-pandemic era. Later this year the chamber will move into new offices at 200 Portage Ave. where it will co-locate with World Trade Centre Winnipeg (which it is a founding partner of) and CentrePort Canada.

Winnipeg has developed a reputation in the chamber community as being an innovative organization and at its annual meeting this year it is announcing a transformational partnership that would be the first of its kind in Canada.

Ryan Klassen, who recently stepped down as vice-president of business solutions at Bell MTS after more than 18 years with the company, said, "The chamber has done a lot for my career and for the Winnipeg business community."

Whereas about 80 per cent of its members are small or medium-sized businesses, the vast majority of the largest businesses in the city are also members.

Dumas swears by the power of the chamber, especially for small business operators who want to get some visibility for their business.

"It has done amazing things for my business," she said. "It has allowed me to grow a really big network. I have had a lot of Indigenous entrepreneurs ask me how to get into the non-Indigenous market. For me it has been the chamber."

During the pandemic it worked hard to keep its members — likely forgiving some dues — and has come out with just about the same

number of members as before COVID.



"Ultimately we said we would all have to find a way to learn to live with it," said Remillard. "Out of the ashes of the pandemic we're starting over on a new phase at the chamber. The challenge and opportunity has energized me."

With old photos of Bannatyne, Ashdown, McDermot and others lining the walls of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce Remillard said it makes him think that the history of Winnipeg is the history of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce.

"They are inseparable," he said. "I hope and believe the future of both will remain interdependent and intertwined. I would not have it any other way."

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