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Few women hold board positions in new BBA

Premium content from Birmingham Business Journal by Jimmy DeButts, Staff

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The Birmingham Business Alliance trails far behind its Southern peers in female representation on its board of directors.

Only nine women sit on the current 125-member BBA board, which is composed of the former directors of the Metropolitan Development Board and Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce.

And that's the lowest percentage among seven Southern chambers of commerce reviewed by the Birmingham Business Journal. None of the CEOs of Birmingham's 10 highest revenue producing women-owned businesses are represented on the new BBA board.

BBA spokesman Dave Rickey pointed out that the current board is a combination of the old organizations' boards and said the BBA board will be reseeded in December.

Rickey said the BBA, as a new organization, has "significant opportunities."

"One of those opportunities is to have a board truly reflective of the business community in the region," Rickey's statement said. "We will work towards that goal."

In contrast to the BBA's low female representation, 12 of Memphis' 43 board members are women, or 28 percent of its board. Birmingham's female board representation is 7 percent. Chambers in Louisville, Charlotte, Nashville, Jacksonville and Austin, Texas, have boards in which women hold at least 16 percent of the seats.

Charlotte's chamber has 63 board members, including 20 women.

Birmingham is ready for women to play larger business leadership roles, said Mayer Electric Supply Co. Inc. Chairman Nancy Collat Goedecke. Mayer Electric generated \$678 million of

revenue in 2008, the most of Birmingham's largest women-owned businesses, according to Birmingham Business Journal research.

Goedecke – who has not been asked to serve on the chamber board – said the region's corporate climate is slowly moving toward inclusiveness, but board rooms remain mostly a male-dominated arena.

"Unfortunately it's the same old people," Goedecke said. "They are good people, but they seem to recycle people. We need to make a concerted effort to fill the new slots with more women."

Women represented 52 percent of metropolitan Birmingham's population in 2004, according to data on the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce Web site. While creating the BBA this spring, BBA CEO Dalton Smith said he drew inspiration from various aspects of the chambers of commerce in Nashville, Austin and Charlotte – all of which have substantially more female representation on their boards.

Regions Financial Corp. CEO Dowd Ritter, BBA board member and chairman of the executive committee charged with merging MDB and the chamber this spring, was not available for comment this story. Energen Corp. CEO James McManus, vice chair of the executive committee, also was not available.

The BBA's board includes three ex-officio women members – Shelby County Commission Chairwoman Lindsey Allison, Jefferson County Commission President Bettye Fine Collins and Birmingham City Council President Carole Smitherman.

The other women members are Leadership Birmingham Executive Director Ann Florie, University of Alabama at Birmingham President Carol Garrison, Birmingham Coca-Cola Bottling Community Relations Director Walker Jones, UAB Vice President for Development of Alumni and External Relations Shirley Salloway Kahn, Cox Radio Senior Marketing Consultant Deidra Lloyd and Colonial Bank's President of Corporate Lending Susan Compton.

Ram Tool & Supply Co. Inc. Chair Mimi Head said board participation requires a big time commitment and that might be one reason women business owners aren't highly represented on corporate boards. The leader of a firm with \$175 million in 2008 revenue said she has not been asked to be part of the BBA's board and was surprised women made up less than 10 percent of the board's members.

"It's shocking compared to other cities," Head said. "Women are not asked to be on these boards even if they had the time. I don't know why."

Birmingham businesswomen are a vital cog in Birmingham's economic engine, but they are a relatively untapped commodity, according to Kelly Schuck, managing director of corporate and consulting psychology firm TalentQuest. Schuck noted the area's top 10 women-owned firms represent \$1.1 billion of revenue.

She said it is critical their talents are utilized for the region's future growth.

"Making positive change requires commitment and a willingness to move beyond the status quo," Schuck said. "For Birmingham, this involves ensuring that our leaders are culturally competent and eager to foster an open habitat for new people and new ideas. Leaders need to

more broadly define the term culture rather than limiting its meaning to race and ethnicity.”

Several of Birmingham’s chamber of commerce peer executives said they strive for board diversity. Austin Chamber of Commerce President Mike Rollins said his board does its best to mirror the demographics of his business community.

“We try to make the board reflective as much as possible of the membership,” Rollins said.