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New chamber survey to monitor attitudes in retail, service sectors

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The Ames Chamber of Commerce and Ames Economic Development Commission has been gathering data on business conditions from Mid-Iowa's largest employers for several years.

"But these folks do business on a national, if not a global, basis," said Ron Hallenbeck, vice president for existing business for the chamber/commission.

Now, the Chamber and AEDC are going to "drill down" into the local market, with a four-to five-month process designed to find out about local businesses in the retail, tourism and service industries.

"Our executive call program includes a lot of companies that we've been seeing on an annual basis, in Ames, Huxley and Story City," Hallenbeck said.

But now the survey is going farther afield, he said. It's going to concentrate on businesses that sell their goods and services mainly in the Mid-Iowa market.

To do that, the AEDC has worked with Chicago-based Blane, Canada Ltd., a company that develops and sells business survey software. The new program, Hallenbeck said, is Convention, Retail, Tourism and (Local) Services, or CRTS.

The detailed survey will measure the opinions of local business owners and local retailers on issues ranging from their plans for the immediate future to their attitudes about the local workforce and how well local government serves their needs.

"We will be talking to them about things like what they believe to be their biggest business achievements in the last three years, whether they plan to expand or renovate their businesses, and how well the local education system trains their workers," Hallenbeck said.

To this point, the Chamber and AEDC has focused its surveys on the approximately 50 largest employers in the Mid-Iowa market.

"This survey is going to look at the same issues and same problems faced by the larger employers, but on a different scale," Hallenbeck said.

"We hope to find out how these local businesses feel about using more electrical services or their concerns about the Ames water rates. We expect a much more

comprehensive view of what local business owners feel about the community.”

There will be larger employers in the local survey, such as Iowa State University, Mary Greeley Medical Center and the banks and lending institutions. But Hallenbeck said meetings also are scheduled within the Main Street Cultural District, the South Duff Avenue, Campustown and west Ames commercial districts.

Additional interviews will be arranged with City Council members and municipal planners.

“What we’d like to do is compare and contrast the survey answers that we get from these different areas and see how much the attitudes vary,” he said. “If there are different points of view, we want to know why.”

To his knowledge, nothing like this has been done in recent years, Hallenbeck said.

The Chamber and AEDC is hoping to recruit survey volunteers from the Young Professionals of Ames, gather the information during the fall and early winter, then begin doing live and Web-based presentations after Jan. 1, 2010.

CRTS sample question

QUESTION: Please rate your satisfaction with the following utility services on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest)

- Water services
- Sewer services
- Solid waste removal
- Natural gas
- Electricity
- Telecommunications (voice)
- Cellular services
- Internet access
- Internet speed

Source: Blane, Canada Ltd., CRTS On-Site Visit Form

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