

JOHN POWELL

Reflects On Year As Chamber Chair



Still waters run deep.

Perhaps that all familiar colloquialism best summaries Cary Chamber of Commerce's outgoing chairman John Powell, whose quiet mannerisms and soft-spoken style belies the fiery passion of the Chamber's number one cheerleader over the past year.

Powell has witnessed many changes at the Chamber in the short period of time from when he first began preparing to assume the leadership role until today when he is preparing to pass the baton. But, there is one thing that has not wavered, and that is his commitment to help shape the Chamber as the catalyst of business growth in Cary.

Of course, the journey has not been easy.

When he prepared to take over the leadership reins last year, he was faced with a business environment that was still struggling to shake off the ill effects of an economic downturn; a new mayor, who was just getting his feet on the ground and recently had been elected on a platform of pro-growth; and to top it all, it was a national election year where much of the community's business leaders kept one eye on Cary and another on the national scene. To some, it may have seemed like a three-ring circus, but for Powell it was an exciting time to be the Chamber's chair.

"I have always enjoyed having a lot going on in my business life ... making things happen and seeing things happen," he said. "So, this past year has been a lot of fun for me personally and I think it has also been a positive year for the Chamber".

"There were a lot of challenges within the Cary business community, many of which came from the slow-growth policies of the past. I would probably say that I saw 2004 as a year of healing, and 2005 is a year of revival and resurgence for the local business economy."

Powell, president of Powell Properties, is no stranger to the Chamber or to the business community in Cary. His father, Dillard Powell, has practiced law in Cary for many years and has been actively involved in both business and civic affairs.

Powell and his father share with only one other father/son team a particularly interesting fact – that of being Chairman of the Cary Chamber of Commerce. Ralph and Gary Ashworth are the only other father/son team to have that distinction. Having grown up watching his Father's interest in the Chamber instilled in the younger Powell the importance of Chamber involvement.

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– John Powell

opened my business was to join the Cary Chamber of Commerce," he recalled. "Certainly, I think Dad helped to set the example for me, because I knew that being successful in business meant having business people help each other."

"I've always operated on the principle that if you are a business owner you are not maximizing your potential unless you are a Chamber member. There are a lot of intelligent people who operate businesses in the community and in helping each other, we can all grow."

Powell said that one of the mistakes new Chamber members make is to "join the Chamber and sit back and wait for the phone to ring." He quickly pointed out that joining the Chamber without becoming actively involved is like going to a baseball game with a blindfold on – you may be there physically, but you're not going to get much out of it.

"I wanted to get something out of the Chamber and I wanted it to help me grow my business," he said. "Therefore, I got involved right off the bat. I took advantage of the various educational benefits, participated in Chamber events, and went to Business After Hours. It seemed the more I got involved, the more I benefited from that involvement."

That commitment eventually landed Powell leadership roles on various committees, then a seat on the Chamber board, and eventually to his current role as Chairman, a post he has held since August of 2004. This September he will hand over the Chairman's reins to Brian Reid of Paragon Commercial Bank.

What has he gained from his Chairman's activities over the past year?

"Probably the first thing that

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comes to mind is my admiration for the (Chamber) staff," he said. "We have what I consider to be the best Chamber staff that I have ever encountered. They continue to amaze me with what they do and can do, especially when you consider the amount of work they are able to get done with such a small staff. They are truly outstanding."

"I have also become a big fan of Howard Johnson, president of the Cary Chamber of Commerce. He is truly an amazing person and has a wealth of information on the Cary business community ... both from a historical perspective and where it is going in the future. When you are the Chamber Chair, you get to see a lot of things from a different perspective, and I continue to be impressed with the way the staff maximizes our opportunities."

Powell is unique in the Cary business community in that he is a native of the area, seeing the town grow from a small bedroom community to one of North Carolina's major cities.



John Powell and Cary Chamber of Commerce President Howard Johnson

Courtesy Cary Chamber

As chairman, he has had the opportunity to appreciate the respect the town is getting throughout North Carolina, as well as the national and international attention."

"Those who moved to the area and have gotten involved with the Chamber in recent years may probably take the respect Cary gets from other communities for granted," he continued. "But I don't. I am proud of the fact that the Cary Chamber is seen as a regional leader. Years ago, I think we (the Chamber) were just glad to get a seat at the table. Today, we are not only there, we are leading the discussion."


"That is a tribute to the hard work of many people who came before me, and I am glad to have been able to continue the tradition. Even with all we have accomplished, I think the future looks even brighter."

While so much of his involvement as Chairman has been representing the Chamber, Powell feels his involvement has not taken away from his business commitments.

"Being involved in commercial real estate transactions throughout the Triangle exposes you to a wide range of people in the business community," he said. "I certainly think my involvement as Chairman for the past year has increased my exposure as well as my knowledge of local and regional issues which can ultimately impact our projects. I want to take this knowledge to my client base and improve their business profile. We are fortunate to represent many businesses that are Chamber members and I enjoy providing them a quality service based on accurate information about issues that impact them today as well as tomorrow."

"You definitely get to know people better when you are working with them on committees, but when you travel with them, have dinner with them, and play golf with them you truly get the opportunity to know them as a person. These relationships prove invaluable in business settings and allow everyone to establish a common ground."

What does the future hold for the outgoing Chamber Chairman? Will he drift away now that he has "done his duty?"

"Definitely not," Powell said with a quiet laugh. "Just because I will no longer be Chairman doesn't mean that I will not be involved. The Chamber will always be a part of my business plan and is a benefit to the members of my team at Powell Properties. Hopefully I'll be seen as someone who continually encourages others to become leaders in the Chamber and in the community. Our involvement only enhances the quality of life and quality business climate that exists today. Cary was a great town many years ago and will be a great town many years down the road." 

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