Suire seeks schools-chamber partnership

By LORI CHANDLER
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Harold Suire, vice president of education and leadership for the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce, knows he's going to be in the hot seat on occasion when it comes to local education.

After all, the chamber has formed a political action committee called Champac, which has targeted the fall School Board races as its initial involvement in local elections. While that group will provide support to some incumbents, it also will actively recruit potential new candidates.

Suire would like to see the chamber as a support group to the School Board, and also as a board watcher.

"I would like to see us in a partnership where we're allowed to criticize and have credibility to be able to suggest positive change," Suire said. "We're not out to run the school system. This community needs credible board watchers, and there's no reason why we shouldn't be."

Suire said that so far, his presence has been well accepted by the board.

"They've viewed us as a community group that has contributed," Suire said. "Some of them might like us to be just that, but a good board member will recognize that the chamber, like many other community groups, can be a great help in achieving goals."

While the chamber has been represented at board meetings and as sponsors in several public school programs and events, Suire's role in the school system is increasing.

He's a familiar sight at school board meetings and functions. Recently, the board approved the formation of a special panel to study school finances, a move supported by the chamber, the East Baton Rouge Parish Commission on Excellence and the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators.

That panel is a prerequisite to any tax elections in...
East Baton Rouge Parish to raise money for teacher raises or capital improvements, chamber officials say. "Should the system, after the study is conducted, want to increase revenues, the chamber wants to be a positive catalyst for that," Suire said. "But we can't support it until there is greater confidence in the system."

He was asked — and agreed — to serve on the board of directors of Friends of Public Education and Volunteers in Public Schools. The East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators maintains regular contact with him. "The reaction to me has been positive," Suire said. "They see the chamber caring about the general quality of life."

When Suire speaks before the board on subjects ranging from school finance to testing, it isn't by accident.

Suire has had 10 years of experience as an educator — as a teacher at the junior high and high school levels, a high school principal, an assistant superintendent and a university instructor. He's also held various business positions, including three years as division head and vice president of personnel for a bank holding company.

Suire's involvement in education also is actively supported by his superiors, who made the education division separate with its own budget and staff. The chamber's education committee is composed of business people, school officials and business and civic organizations.

Out of that committee, a new alternative school for dropouts was proposed. The chamber hopes to see the school begin in September. That's just one of the ways in which Suire hopes to increase the business community's involvement in education.

"It's a project where businesses can provide jobs and training and students to stay in school," he said of the school.

Most of the credit should go to chamber volunteers in improving education, he said. "There will be the benefit of my experience, and I want to do research and guidance," Suire said. "I want to be the bridge between the business community and education."

He also said he's still relatively new in the local school system. "Because I was so involved at the state level, the board is still getting to know me," Suire said. "I haven't had any obstacles put in my way."

Suire said that because he has had education experience, he can understand the problems that education officials face. "I will speak to the issues more," he said. "I think I have a healthy perspective on what our problems are in this state."

Suire said he hopes that the chamber can involve itself in financing pilot projects and other school programs, as well as in a long-range plan. "I want to see East Baton Rouge Parish become the model parish in the state," Suire said.