Education, the economy, reform top chamber goals

By BOB ANGERS
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Education, the economy and legislative reform are on the front burner of the Greater Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, says Ralph U. Thomas, executive vice president.

The chamber established 1987 priorities at a Goals Conference held in March. In the package were objectives in culture and the arts, health and safety, education, a vigorous business environment, expansion of international and local trade, state and national affairs, membership, industry and technology, waterways, streets and highways, and aviation.

But one of the state of the economy emerges as a major chamber concern and many of the goals seek to address the problem.

A state education system that ensures quality education is in the forefront of improving the climate for new and expanded business.

A task force has been formed and President Gene Fortier is a member reflecting the organization's serious interest in education, Thomas told TheAdvertiser. He said several meetings have been held and reports made to the school board.

As an example of one of the objectives this year is to study the possibility of expanding a school that would lower the homestead exemption with funds dedicated to the school board.

Not addressed by the chamber is the dilemma of opposing additional tax on business and industry and a new school property tax failing on all residential owners including commercial property.

"Lafayette is doing better than an average job in education," is a message that the chamber helps convey, says Thomas. "There is some who feel that maybe the most important issue is the employment of a school superintendent, an issue in which we have taken a serious interest. We feel like we had a class person in Vashier (Dr. Wayne Vashier, the former superintendent who resigned to accept a similar post in his native state)."

Thomas feels that the chamber's interest in education has established a close relationship with the school board.

The voucher system proposed by the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI) has been under discussion and Thomas expressed disappointment that many who attended a recent conference on the issue did not approach it with a more open mind.

"LABI offered a concept, or model, for discussion seeking input and realized that we had some imperfections," Thomas noted. He felt LABI deserved some credit for displaying some initiative. "But the Chamber of Commerce is a long way from forming an official position on something like a voucher system," the vice president said. "We don't know a lot about the LABI position and doubt that a voucher system will be installed this year.''

Thomas, who feels the Louisiana education system leaves a lot to be desired, said that while LABI has done some good things for the state and serves like a Louisiana Chamber of Commerce, the local chamber and industry are in line with LABI positions. They have found a $1.2 billion bond issue with employees and employers sharing the cost of reducing the unemployment comp debt to the federal government.

The trial lawyers. "The chamber is trying to strike some balance," said Thomas. "Some gains have been made in insurance reporting." He observed that the Louisiana Legislative Commission sees that some of the methods used in granting rate increases may be flawed. And Thomas predicts introduction of a smaller legislative package of only four or five proposals will help alleviate the situation.

Organized labor and business groups seem to be closer to an agreement on reforming unemployment compensation. He said ALF-CIO President Victor Bussich fingers are crossed by the tax that arose in the last legislative session.

He expressed concern that trial lawyers seemed to have become the sole group responsible for creating the tort reform problem. Thomas feels that responsibility should be shared by four groups:

- Judges, who in many cases make unreasonable and outrageous awards;
- Jurors, who must bear some of the responsibility for the awards;
- The insurance companies, and
- The trial lawyers.