

Oldham Chamber of Commerce, economic group merge

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The recent merging of the Oldham Chamber of Commerce and the county's economic development group will bring a unified vision when it comes to attracting and expanding businesses, said Deana Epperly Karem, interim executive director of the new group.

"There's one stop; there's one place to go for information," she said of the merger, which was finalized Feb. 19.

The merger was an 18-month process for the chamber and the Oldham Economic Development Authority, and one that brought a few concerns for Karen Baughman of Crestwood. Baughman said she's concerned that the chamber would be using taxpayer money to help private businesses.

"The chamber is not here to help taxpayers out," Baughman told Fiscal Court members recently.

Karem said private funding including membership fees **accounts** for 65 percent to 70 percent of the agency's budget. The economic development authority will continue to receive money from Fiscal Court each year, and Karem said that will go specifically for economic development.

"All that's merged here are the boards,"

she said.

The new group, called the Oldham Chamber and Economic Development agency, has about 420 member businesses and also will work with Oldham's more than 1,800 businesses.

The group will oversee business attraction, retention and expansion in Oldham, along with member services and programs for chamber members, Karem said. The group's board will include all 22 members from both boards, but through attrition will become a 16-member board, according to plans.

"We are confident that Oldham County businesses will be better served under a unified effort to attract and retain companies in our community," said Jim Kramer, the former chairman of the authority. Kramer is now vice chairman of economic development for the new agency.

The board's new chairman is Bill Howard of Fastline Publications. Robin Lawson, the

former chamber chairman, is vice chairman of membership services.

Karem said the group's next steps will be to launch the brand that will go with the new name, make final staffing decisions and outline priorities for the first six months.

Bruce Ogle, a senior executive for the Rawlings Group in La Grange and a member of the board, said the merger "makes good business sense."

There was a large amount of overlap between the two groups, he said.

Karem said chamber members will still get the same services, including quarterly dinners and regular breakfasts with speakers. The merger also will unify Oldham's approach to serving businesses, bringing even **more** value for members, Karem said. The merger does not change the membership dues for the chamber side, which still will be required, she said.

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