

Chamber of Commerce accreditation to boost D.C. lobbying efforts

Local CofC celebrates distinction shared by 221 of nearly 7,000 counterparts; sees recognition as sign of the chamber's work, despite widespread criticism

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The U.S. Chamber of Commerce extended its highly coveted accreditation to the Puerto Rico Chamber of Commerce last month in a move hailed by local chamber officials as a validation of the organization's work on behalf of the island's private sector.

"This is an extraordinary moment for everyone associated with the Puerto Rico Chamber of Commerce," Chamber President Salvador Calaf told CARIBBEAN BUSINESS during an exclusive interview.

"A lot of work went into obtaining this accreditation," Executive Vice President Edgardo Bigas added. "And I don't mean now. I mean a lot of work over many years building an effective organization and piling up the achievements that led the U.S. Chamber to grant this recognition."

Of the 221 accredited chambers, most are city chambers and only six are state chambers. Of the latter, four have obtained an Accreditation with Distinction, while Puerto Rico and Kentucky boast the Accredited State Chamber rank.

The local chamber joins the 221 out of 6,936 chambers in the Washington, D.C.-based national organization's network across the U.S. (states and territories) to have earned accreditation.

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That includes, mainly, the local chamber's lobbying agenda.

"We've always had an excellent relationship with the U.S. Chamber and call on them whenever we're in town to visit Congress, the White



Small Business Committee Chairwoman Aissa Betancourt countered complaints that the chamber has "lost its relevance" by insisting that "while the chamber is very active in the promotion of the island's development," it also plays a big role as a networking and growth channel for any business on the island.

House or any federal agency," added Bigas, who is a member of the U.S. Chamber's prestigious Committee of 100, a group of executives from chambers across the country consulted on policy and other matters.

By all indications, a chamber undergoes a rather rigorous screening to meet the criteria for accreditation, including several visits by an auditor who assigns points based on eight categories: governance, finances, human resources, government affairs, program development, technology, communications and facilities.

"We had to bare ourselves," Bigas said. "It's a tough process. But that's what makes it valuable, because it's a seal of quality and commitment to our work."

It is also, Calaf said, a "great guide that will help us improve continually from now on, since they tell us where we're strong and which areas we need to improve."

CHAMBER UNDER FIRE

Accreditation couldn't have come at a better time for the Puerto Rico Chamber, with a large chorus of businesspeople assailing the organization for "insufficient activism," as one put it, in the face of the island's worst economic crisis—a deep, six-year slump that has run from 2006 to the present—since the Great Depression.

"The chamber has lost relevance," said a business leader who asked to remain anonymous. "That's the only reason the Private Sector Coalition was formed, which dates back even before the recession began [in reference to the organization founded in 2007 to promote the island's



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development]. It was filling a gap created by the Chamber of Commerce's passivity."

Calaf was quick to counter.

"That's just not so. This chamber has been present and proactive in every major struggle to further the island's development and the best interests of the private sector," he said, pinpointing key issues facing the business community today—permitting, labor reform, energy costs, tax reform and the closing law, among others.

The organization's achievements, added former President Juan Bauzá, "are clear and on the record. We wouldn't have received this accreditation if it weren't so."

Adding to the chamber's defense, Small Business Committee Chairwoman Aissa Betancourt said, "While the chamber is very active in the promotion of the island's development, that isn't its only role. I'm living proof of what this organization can do when one decides to become engaged."

Betancourt, who is also the Puerto Rico president of employment-search franchise Snelling Staffing, made an impassioned case for the chamber as a networking and growth channel for any business on the island.

"It's easy to complain when you're standing on the sidelines and not becoming involved to see what is really going on and how you and every one of us can help," she said. "I know this much: When I launched my business a few years ago, I knew I wanted to become active in the chamber.

"The networking has helped the business grow, but the satisfaction of knowing I've made a difference has been even more important, and that's something every single businessperson in Puerto Rico can decide to do. You just have to step up." ■