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Better days ahead, NKY Chamber head says

Doing more with less: That's the primary challenge facing employers regionally and nationally as they work their way through the recession's aftermath and look for innovative ways to grow, says Gary Beatrice, president of Fort Mitchell-based Business Benefits and the newly elected chair of the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.

To help businesses navigate hard times, Beatrice, 47, says the Chamber is launching several key initiatives over the next year to grow jobs and enhance the region's entrepreneurial spirit.



WHAT ARE THE Northern Kentucky Chamber's top priorities in the coming year?

"We view the chamber as problem-solvers, and to that end we're going to be focusing on entrepreneurship, in terms of helping individuals find answers and solutions for the challenges and problems that come up as they work to start up and grow. In a down economy, you see a lot of people who decide to take this time as an opportunity to pursue goals and dreams and they start a business to accomplish that. We're also going to be very focused on being a resource for women in business and making sure we're serving their need. And we want to get heavily involved in recruiting and training the workforce to be able to meet the needs of our future employers. Some of these things we'll accomplish next year. Some will take a little longer.

HOW LONG DO YOU think the local economic recovery will take?

"Business people I talk to generally feel like we have bottomed out, but I don't think we're going to turn on a dime. It's going to take some time to get back to where we were a few years ago. One of the things we have to see improve is unemployment levels. Unfortunately, the numbers in Kentucky are worse than the numbers nationally. We have to have an environment that's business friendly so that we can begin to put people back to work."

WHERE'S ONE PLACE to begin making changes?

"For nearly a decade our members have been dealing with ever-increasing health insurance premiums. There are some factors that our state government can easily address, including creating a more carrier-friendly environment. We still have very few carriers in Kentucky, which is in part fallout from our misguided reform efforts in the mid-'90s. (We should also begin) encouraging and incentivising employer wellness programs, allowing more flexibility for small businesses to purchase coverage together in buying groups, and implementing medical malpractice reform. We can't wait and hope that the federal government will make changes that will alleviate our local burden, particularly when nearly every federal proposal I've seen would increase the cost to business and regulate business further."

Lisa Bernard-Kuhn