

Peoria Chamber of Commerce

Est. 1911

In 1911, a group of business people with a strong faith in community formed the Peoria Association of Commerce – today known as the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce, part of the Heartland Partnership.

A chamber of commerce stands for many things: attracting new business, helping existing business develop and working to build a strong, local economy. The first newsletter rings true today: *“Peoria is famed for many things. She is beautiful for situation. America can show nothing of its kind more attractive than the valley of the Illinois River...the city, itself, its foliage, its homes, its avenues, is lacking in nothing that commends a home city.”* One of the first committees – the “Good Roads Committee” -- pioneered Galena Road to Chillicothe, the first paved highway in the area.

The Chamber was an integral part of innovation in early Peoria, according to an early newsletter. *“About two years ago the Peoria Merchants Association took up the matter of lighting the retail district with ornamental electric streetlights with the result that the newborn year 1912 will soon be blinding its baby eyes in the glaring light of 30 blocks of blazing glory.”*

The following year, the newsletter asked, *“Why should Peoria not be a retail center, situated in one of the richest communities the sun ever shone upon; rich in fertile soil that will produce almost anything that ever grew out of the ground, rich in abundance of fuel right under our feet; rich in any quantity of pure water; good for any purpose, even to drink; rich in a diversified population of progressive, industrious and thrifty people?”*

In 1917, the newsletter cited numerous benefits of membership including: 1) To serve as a clearinghouse for information to the business community; 2) To build the city; 3) To foster cooperation that brings “brick and mortar”; 4) To stay in close touch with “big affairs”; 5) As a moral obligation to one’s city; among many others. The list stands up well today, and has contributed to many business success stories in the Peoria area too numerous to list.

Strong, far-sighted leadership has been another quality of the Chamber. In 1932, members raised funds for a new Peoria airport after the Depression-era electorate twice turned down referenda to construct a facility to accommodate the larger planes of the day. The group recognized the potential of air travel and its importance to the Peoria area business community. At one time, the Convention and Visitors Bureau was once the function of the Chamber of Commerce, although it is now a separate entity.

Education is another priority for the Chamber. Early on, members raised funds for the formation of the Farm Bureau. One of their first activities was to secure sites for the proposed

Northern Regional Research Laboratory – the Ag Lab – while helping the lab locate here. The Ag Lab remains a pillar in the scientific community, having led the way in research with breakthroughs that have impacted the worlds of food, fuel and medicine. A Community Leadership School and the Adopt-A-School program help members foster an *“awareness of civic responsibility...and...contribute to a better Peoria of tomorrow...assuring a better Peoria for future citizens.”* The Peoria Chamber of Commerce has been taking care of business for 100 years.