

Local chambers of commerce under pressure, in foreclosure

by [Brian Bandell](#)

South Florida's chambers of commerce have suffered along with their members during the recession. One chamber now may lose its headquarters.

On Jan. 7, Boca Raton-based **1st United Bank** hit the **Deerfield Beach Chamber of Commerce** with a foreclosure lawsuit targeting its headquarters, which it has inhabited since 1959. Janyce Becker, the chamber's executive director, said it has \$6,700 past due on a mortgage, with \$109,000 remaining.

The Greater Deerfield Chamber has a cash flow problem because many of its 475 members can't afford to pay their chamber dues, she said. Most of its members are small businesses. According to the Business Journal's 2010 Book of Lists, it had 650 members in 2009.

"If it's between paying membership dues and electricity, then you will keep your electricity on," Becker said. "If you are a small business and you have to lay off people, and it's suddenly you and your wife running the business, you don't have time for breakfasts or after-hours events."

Becker said her board is negotiating with the bank and hopes to come to a forbearance agreement.

Davie attorney Scott Kleiman, who represents 1st United in the lawsuit, declined comment.

The Greater Deerfield Chamber is not alone in dealing with declining membership and the associated dues. Membership at the **Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce** declined to 1,000 in 2009 from 1,500 in 2007. The **Greater Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce** saw its membership dip to 1,500 in 2009 from 1,700 in 2008. Membership in the **Greater Hollywood Chamber of Commerce** fell to 785 in 2009 from 950 the year before.

The region's biggest chamber, the **Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce**, bucked the trend by increasing membership to 5,500 last year from 5,000 in 2008.

Dan Lindblade, president and CEO of the **Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce**, said his organization collected \$862,000 in membership dues last year, while it's budget included \$1 million for dues. But, it was still profitable because it made cutbacks to staffing levels and salaries in late 2008 to deal with the expected downturn. Membership stands at about 1,300, he said, down from 1,750 in 2007.

While some chamber members are dropping out or downgrading their memberships to lower tiers, others are stepping up. Lindblade said member companies are donating furniture and landscaping to the chamber offices. Members are also attending more networking events to drum up business.

"I would hope that chambers wouldn't pull back their political influence because we have an election year,"

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Lindblade said. “Everything that happens in government ends up having some type of impact, so for us to lay that down and only coordinate networking events would be a huge mistake.”

Becker said the Greater Deerfield Chamber continues to run networking events, and it is making more calls for member recruitment. But, her chamber has competition.

“Chambers have problems with social networking organizations and Internet groups that require no membership,” Becker said. “Chambers need to look at the bigger picture. How can we reinvent ourselves to make chamber membership more useful?”

Some professionals attend social networking groups in niche industries because it better reflects the people they’re looking to do business with, said **Tadd Schwartz, president of Coconut Grove-based**  **Schwartz Media Strategies**. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are helpful, as well, but can’t replace face-to-face contact, he said.

Schwartz is active in the Greater Miami Chamber and has secured clients through his contacts there, but he has declined invitations from smaller chambers.

“I haven’t joined because I don’t see the value for me,” he said of the smaller chambers. “You’ve got to show me how it’s going to help business and how I can contribute in a way that will make membership meaningful. You will only benefit by how much you put into it.”

 **Boardroom Communications** Executive VP Todd Templin said he folded the  **Weston Business Chamber of Commerce**, where he was chairman, into a council of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber a few years ago because it made more sense to merge the growing chamber, instead of hiring a full-time staff.

“There are only so many sponsorship dollars to go around in the county,” he said. “Everyone is fighting for the same dollar.”

Last year, the Oakland Park/ **Wilton Manors Chamber of Commerce** also became a council of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber. Lindblade said it was having trouble operating independently, but now its members have access to more services. He said it makes sense for more small chambers to merge.