



## Chamber CEO returns to Kentucky for new challenge

On March 1, Dave Adkisson, former mayor of Owensboro, returned to Kentucky to take the helm of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce as its president and chief executive officer.

Most recently he served as president of the Birmingham, Alabama, Regional Chamber of Commerce, where he worked with business and political leaders in the 70-county metropolitan area to develop consensus around an agenda for the region's growth, and strengthened the chamber's public policy division and its presence in both Washington, D.C., and Alabama's capital, Montgomery.

Adkisson focused resources on efforts to improve the region's transportation infrastructure, including the construction of Interstate 22 to Memphis, the Northern Beltline and a regional mass transit system, each



project involving more than \$1 billion.

A graduate of Georgetown College, Adkisson earned a masters degree in ethics from Harvard University in 1975. He began his career with the Owensboro Chamber of Commerce, first as project manager and then as the executive vice president.

At age 34, Adkisson was elected mayor of Owensboro. During his eight-year administration (1986 to 1995), he led the effort to revitalize Owensboro's downtown, created a performing arts complex, developed the MidAmerica Industrial Airpark, expanded the city's parks and bikeways and developed a new bridge linking Kentucky and Indiana across the Ohio River.

During his 20 years of service in Kentucky, Adkisson held several statewide leadership posts, including chairman of the Kentucky Advocates

for Higher Education, president of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce Executives (KCCE) and chairman of the Kentucky Center for Public Issues.

With his first grandchild born in May, Adkisson and his wife Bonnie are happy to be living again in Kentucky, closer to their extended families.

He spoke recently with *City* about his return to Kentucky and the state's business environment.

### What are some of the differences you have noted in returning to Kentucky after five years?

I noticed, for example, the conversations in the legislature about tobacco, specifically about a cigarette tax. They were clearly different than any conversation of five to 10 years ago. Clearly, the political environment is different with two strong parties in Frankfort.

On a community basis, it's fun to drive through the state and see the construction projects that have been undertaken in the last five years. Construction is a fact of life from Pikeville to Paducah, where they're building a new arts center. It's really a remarkable thing to see the construction in last five years in so many downtowns. Most of it is well integrated into the historic aspects of the cities.

### Did you learn lessons that you will apply in your new position?

In Birmingham, I learned about the importance of health care and technology in developing new jobs. It's a strong medical research city, and I see the potential for Louisville and Lexington especially to create those kinds of jobs. Those types of jobs are very attractive because they're usually funded by outside parties, such as research companies or foundations, and bring in millions of dollars to the local economy.

### What are your immediate goals as the new CEO of the chamber?

The first thing I'm doing is getting reacquainted with the state. I set a goal of meeting with 200 key business leaders in my first 100 days, so I'm traveling quite a bit. I'm also getting to know the issues in depth. I was fortunate to arrive at the end of the legislative session so I could listen and absorb a lot and prepare for the 2006 session.

### How will the tax modernization legislation affect business in the state?

Tax modernization was very positive for business. There may need to be some adjustments, but overall it was very good and will help position Kentucky for job creation. Of course, the specifics are different based on individual businesses, but we estimate the benefit will be about \$120 per employee in Kentucky.

The tax package became a top priority of the chamber. We made sure that no particular business sector would be disadvantaged by the legislation. For example, in an early draft the liquor industry would have been severely disadvantaged.

### Where do you see potential for job creation and growth?

Kentucky is beneficially located for distribution. We expect it to continue to grow. The number of people who work for UPS alone is amazing. Tourism will continue to be a part of the Kentucky economy simply because of the natural beauty here and our central location.

### How will the chamber establish and build relationships with cities?

The leadership of the chamber is interested in re-establishing ties with local communities. Our effectiveness in Frankfort is directly related to our relationships with communities. We have to establish an environment for business on the local level as an advocate for business growth. We will be out in the state more than the chamber has been in the past. We will work with local officials and companies to build a consensus on the agenda for the statehouse.

### What's the role for cities in economic development?

I have a bone-deep appreciation for the role of elected officials in economic development. The state can

sell Kentucky all day long, but if a community doesn't have an industrial park or strong downtown, it will miss out on opportunities. Preparedness for economic development is a local enterprise.

The chamber can be a force for creating a positive business climate. Inevitably economic development will come about on the local level because that's where the decisions are made regarding property, taxes and other priorities.

### What are some of the issues facing economic development efforts?

Gaming is and will continue to be important to certain cities that are losing money to border states. We will continue to look at the tax code to make sure we're competitive. Kentucky's educational system needs continual encouragement because that's ultimately a huge factor for economic development. Local communities are at the vanguard for economic development, and they need encouragement and resources to create jobs.

### Alabama may be one of the few states with a national image worse than that of Kentucky. What can we do in Kentucky to improve the state's image with investors and others?

We can work to market Kentucky very aggressively, but ultimately the only thing that changes an image is a changed reality. We have to continue to make a commitment to quality education. The legislature can't pass one bill and think that we've fixed education. It's something we have to continue to strive to improve.

### Does Kentucky have the attitude necessary to be competitive in economic development?

I came home during March Madness and then we went into the spring racing season, and I was reminded again how special Kentucky is. As I fly around the state, it's easy to see that pride is strong in our communities. That's an important asset for building a bright future. And it's not that way in every community I've been in. When you fly into Louisville, you see the paintings of the horses in the gift shop and hear the mayor welcome you over the loudspeaker. That's impressive. What's happening in this state is exciting. There's a lot of vitality here. 🐾

## City WRITERS



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