

Engaging Small Business: A Community Resilience Lesson from Bartlett, Tennessee

Presented by John Threadgill, President, Bartlett Area Chamber of Commerce (Bartlett, Tennessee)

Lessons Learned: Business continuity planning is essential for building local economic resilience. By anticipating and planning for potential disruptions, businesses minimize downtime during a disaster, help the local economy, and maximize their ability to contribute to community relief efforts. Though recognized as a critical aspect of community resilience, continuity planning often is not practiced – especially among small businesses. Local chambers of commerce can serve as natural conduits for helping small businesses overcome educational, communications, and networking barriers to implementing effective continuity plans.

Planning for the worst can easily make its way to the bottom of a small business’s priority list. In the face of scarce resources, time constraints, and the rigors of day-to-day operations, developing a business continuity plan can appear to fail a cost-benefit test, at least in the short term. But countless businesses have learned the hard way that it is not a matter of *if* but *when* disaster will strike. Those not ready risk the permanent closure of their doors or the loss of vital records, assets, revenue, and market share. A well-designed business continuity plan can be an invaluable asset, allowing small businesses not only to weather disasters but to bounce back quickly with minimal disruption in cash flow.



Despite the undisputed benefits of having a continuity plan, many small businesses continue to operate without one.

John Threadgill, president of Bartlett Area Chamber of Commerce (in the Memphis metropolitan area), offers insight into the issues small businesses should consider. With more than 15 years’ experience working with chambers in the Memphis area, he is well acquainted with the issues small businesses face daily. “My experience with large corporations such as FedEx, International Paper, and AutoZone is they have full-time staff to do continuity planning,” he said. This is in sharp contrast to the small business person. “Small- to medium-sized businesses don’t have someone to do it.” The result is a less resilient economic base, with countless community businesses vulnerable to bankruptcy or prolonged closure in a disaster.

Impediments to continuity planning for small businesses are varied. Many small businesses simply do not have the resources required to develop and update a business continuity plan. Other businesses develop a plan but fail to train members of the organization in its execution. Further, even when businesses develop plans, the plans can become outdated, especially with respect to continuously changing communication technologies.

Businesses need a strong provider of a support network, such as a chamber of commerce, to serve as a clearinghouse and a coordinator to help them become better prepared. When networking between community businesses is insufficient, mutual-aid partnerships are not formed and best practices are not shared. Small- to-mid-sized businesses are typically so focused on day-to-day operations that they are unfamiliar with neighbors who might be vital partners in the event of some disruption.

John Threadgill draws on his extensive experience working with the business sector to offer insight into how chambers of commerce are positioned to be catalysts for effective continuity planning for small businesses. One obvious asset chambers have is their membership base. Each



chamber penetrates and engages 10 to 25 percent of the local business community. While Threadgill would like to see an increase in the percentage, chambers still reach a large number of businesses. Chamber membership is more diverse and representative of the community than business associations catering to specific segments. Given this access to a wide membership base, chambers provide support networks. “The primary role of a chamber is to establish and maintain relationships with businesses and the community,” explained Threadgill. By promoting networking, chambers can help businesses help each other through information sharing and partnership building. “These characteristics make it a great conduit for promoting community resilience.”

Threadgill offers some lessons learned from the experience of a local business that greatly benefited from continuity planning and relationships it forged through the Bartlett Chamber of Commerce. In April 2006, Dixie Floors, a small company specializing in quality flooring, suffered a devastating fire as a result of a lightning strike. The Bartlett Fire Department responded quickly but soon had to suspend firefighting for safety reasons. All business inventory was lost in the fire.

The owner of the business had in place a business contingency plan that included regular, off-site electronic file backup of the client base and orders. He immediately arranged for continued business operation in a temporary location across the street from the site of the fire. He contacted his suppliers to begin rebuilding his supplies and initiated longer term plans to relocate the business.

The only immediate need for which the owner was unprepared was the loss of office supplies (from paper clips to computers). When the chamber became aware of the devastation experienced by Dixie Floors and the need for basic supplies, they sent a distress call to their membership base with a list of needs. The following day the business community responded overwhelmingly to the call, with many visiting Dixie Floors to drop off the requested items.

Threadgill believes that because the chamber fosters the cultivation of relationships within the local business community, Dixie’s call for help was answered immediately. “The quick response from local businesses as well as the backup plans helped Dixie Floors recover quickly.” That is what community resilience is all about – being prepared, having contingency plans, and networking with others.