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Chambers opening offices in Viera

Two groups vie for support

BY WAYNE T. PRICE
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The two largest chambers of commerce in Brevard County -- the Cocoa Beach Area Chamber and the Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber -- are staking out the growing community of Viera in a battle for increased membership and influence.

The Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber announced plans Wednesday to open a satellite office off Spyglass Hill Road in Viera, as well as to establish a business academy at the new Viera High. That chamber also is in talks with The Viera Co. for permission to add "Viera" to its official title.

Cocoa Beach Area Chamber of Commerce President and Chief Executive Officer Kathi Schillo said her organization next week plans to announce it also will open a Viera satellite office. Schillo said she "wasn't at liberty" to disclose the location at this time.

Moves by the two business organizations to set up offices in Viera -- a growing residential and retail area straddling Interstate 95 in central Brevard -- is indicative of that community's growing influence on business affairs.

At stake are thousands of dollars in membership fees, as well as deciding which group dominates as a voice for future business, legislative and growth issues in Brevard.

What helps make Viera attractive is its thousands of new homes, new retail shopping venues such as The Avenue Viera, Space Coast Stadium, a new athletic complex, and the base for much of the county's government operations and the school district.

The Viera Co. also is seeking local and state approval for a major development addition to abut its current community, which during the next two decades could add 17,000 more homes, new roads, and additional commercial and retail growth on now-undeveloped land in western Viera.

The Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber's satellite office has been in the works for "quite some time," said Shannon Meyer, the chamber's president and chief executive officer.

"We, the chamber, already have a significant presence in Viera, but Viera is a dynamic, growing area, and the businesses there need additional representation," she said.

Meyer said the chamber also is working with the Brevard Public Schools to set up an Academy of Business and Finance in the new Viera High School for the upcoming school year. Such academies bring in business leaders to discuss business with students and teachers.

Holly Wesche Conn, owner of Wesche Jewelers -- about a month away from a major expansion, moving from her current Melbourne location to Viera -- said the Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber's move to Suntree/Viera was natural.

Wesche Jewelers is a longtime member of that chamber and she said some Suntree/Viera merchants would feel more connected to the chamber with an office nearby and more area sponsored events.

"The new office can make things more inclusive," Conn said.

While the Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber didn't need The Viera Co.'s blessing, the organization likely would need the company's OK if it wants to add "Viera" to its title.

"We are in the process of obtaining authorization from The Viera Co. to incorporate the Viera name into our name," said Diane Gabik, the chamber's executive vice president.

Judi John, community-relations manager for The Viera Co., would only say "a lot of things are in the infant stages."

Avoiding any turf issues -- at least for now -- John added: "We're very close business partners with both chambers."

Schillo said the Cocoa Beach Area Chamber always has been supportive of Viera, as well as having many members from the area. She noted her chamber held its major annual fundraiser --SpringFest - - at Space Coast Stadium in April. The event previously was known as SeaFest, and was held at Port Canaveral.

Schillo also said the Cocoa Beach Area Chamber's original charter in 1968 includes the area from Pineda Causeway, north to State Road 50.

During that chamber's infancy, it worked with and supported the A. Duda & Sons family -- owner of the land where Viera is located, she said.

"They've done a lot to develop the area, and we want to support them," Schillo said of The Viera Co. and the community's merchants. "We have many, many business partners in that area."

As for the possibility of the Melbourne-Palm Bay Area Chamber eventually putting "Viera" in its name, Schillo said: "Right now, that's not an issue."

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