

FINANCE & COMMERCE

Real Estate

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Association update: Chamber's Business Day at the Capitol is next week

by CYNTHIA HABLE, Certified Commercial Investment Members, Minnesota-Dakotas Chapter, Guest Commentary

"Business Day at the Capitol," organized and hosted by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, has grown to become a major legislator-constituent forum on current public policy and legislation affecting business, and a key channel by which business owners can communicate their concerns to their own legislators.

The annual event draws representatives of businesses of all sizes, from every sector, from small tech startups and mom-and-pop manufacturers to Fortune 500 companies — all coming together with a single goal in mind: to meet with their legislators face to face, get to know them as more than just a name in a newspaper, to open up a line for future communications, and most important of all, to personally inform their representatives first-hand of the problems and issues they are encountering as they strive to survive in this tough and very challenging economy.

For those attending the event for the first time, Business Day at the Capitol offers a short course in how to lobby one's own legislators, along with a close-up look at the legislative process itself, and a chance to mingle with other business people from across the state who are concerned about the tax and regulatory framework for business in Minnesota.

This year's event is especially important to those of us who work in the commercial real estate industry. It's our opportunity to demonstrate our support for the interests and concerns of the businesses we represent and serve in our daily lives — our clients, tenant companies, and all of the thousands of users of the commercial and industrial space we develop, sell, lease or manage.

At a time of staggering unemployment numbers, it has become clear to everyone in our industry that without removing the barriers to solid job growth, our industry has no future. Only more and better jobs will reduce the vacancies we are currently facing; stabilize lease rates; restore business property values; slow foreclosures; and revitalize the market for the commercial real estate on which we all depend for our livelihoods.

This year, for our industry, the state capitol is ground zero. Facing enormous budget deficits in this biennium and the next, legislators may well take the easiest way out and target Minnesota businesses with increased property taxes. Participating in Business Day at the Capitol will be a great opportunity to tell our own legislators that Minnesota businesses — our clients and tenants — cannot afford even one more dollar of additional costs in this difficult economy. Businesses in Minnesota already pay far more than their fair share. They cannot afford to pay even more.

We will be asking legislators to: hold the line on the statewide business property tax; exercise great caution in investing scarce taxpayer dollars, while cutting spending wherever possible; and consider carefully the potential damage to private-sector job growth in any legislation they consider.

We appear to be in the early stages of what will be a lengthy recovery. Increasing fixed costs, such as property taxes, on Minnesota employers will make it even more difficult for them to keep their existing employees working, let alone create new jobs or bring back workers they have already been forced to lay off.

Speaking on behalf of the hundreds of commercial real estate investment specialists who make up the membership of our Minnesota-Dakotas Chapter of CCIM, I invite everyone in our industry concerned about lowering property taxes, growing jobs and making Minnesota businesses more competitive to join us at the Capitol next Wednesday, March 10.

To present a unified face for our industry, CCIM (Certified Commercial Investment Members), NAOP (The Commercial Real Estate Development Association), MSCA (Minnesota Shopping Center Association), and BOMA (Building Owners & Managers Association) are cooperating in hosting Business Morning at the Capitol, from 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Our special real estate program will begin with registration at the Crowne Plaza, St. Paul Riverfront, followed by a session update and a special issue briefing for the commercial real estate industry. We will then be bused to the capitol for pre-arranged appointments with legislators, followed by luncheon back at the hotel, with Gov. Tim Pawlenty as invited speaker. It's all free and it's easy to register. Call Lisa Engdahl at (651) 292-4699, (800) 821-2230 or ljengdahl@mnchamber.com.

If we are to succeed in revitalizing commercial real estate, we must defend our own interests and those of our tenant companies and clients at the capitol and in the public policymaking arena. In the immortal words of Woody Allen, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." We must show up. I look forward to seeing you there.

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