

# Fostering urban entrepreneurship: accelerating business opportunity

In today's chaotic climate of corporate scandals, down-sizing and a bear - stock market, the role of African-American and other minority-owned businesses becomes increasingly more important in supplying the necessary employment and consumer spending opportunities that fuel this economy. Minority-owned businesses outpace others in terms of growth and represent a wide range of industries.

Prior to integration, African Americans owned many businesses that not only turned a profit, but also provided social outlets, a neighborhood focal point and community support to the consumers they served. As blacks enjoyed the freedom of being able to shop, eat and specialize where they wanted, their traditional means of support - African-American-owned businesses - suffered. And many who survived this became victims of urban renewal. - -

Despite these new challenges, African-American-owned firms are once again making their mark.

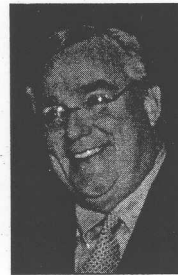
According to the data provided by the U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy, there were an estimated 4 - million minority-owned businesses in 2002 that generated over \$700 billion in revenue and employed about 5 million workers. Of these, over 1 million were African-American-owned firms that employed 770,746 people and generated receipts totaling near \$93 billion.

Here at home, the future success and competitiveness of St. Louis metro -area businesses depends on recruiting, developing and retaining minority talent and promoting minority economic entrepreneurship. Carnegie Mellon professor and author Richard Florida has documented the link between a region's diversity and its economic competitiveness. Achieving diversity in the workplace requires a strong commitment and resources.

In another key initiative to strengthen and focus the region's commitment to



James H. Buford, President,  
Urban League of  
Metropolitan St. Louis



Richard C. Fleming, President  
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building minority-owned businesses and enhancing diversity in the workplace, the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative was launched in Spring of 2001 by the RCGA, Civic Progress, the RBC, the St. Louis Minority Business Council, FOCUS St. Louis, St. Louis 2004 and the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois. Funded by Civic Progress and the RCGA, and housed at the RCGA, the Diversity Initiative helps regional businesses compete more effectively in the New Economy through strengthened workforce diversity and stronger relationships with minority suppliers. To date, more than 130 mid-to-large firms, representing more than 200,000 employees, have joined this collaborative program.

The remarkable success of the annual Salute to Excellence in Business Luncheon, a joint venture between the Regional Chamber and Growth Association, the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis and the St. Louis American Foundation, reflects a growing

women and minorities, but I can't find qualified people."

Sometimes, it's just an excuse, but some managers are sincere. If organizations are really serious about attracting and retaining African Americans, then inclusion must become a priority. Moreover, if African Americans are not welcomed in greater numbers into the mainstream of business, prospects for improving the area's competitive position are diminished.

There is a high correlation between high diversity levels and regions that are leaders in the "new economy." The St. Louis region needs a comprehensive diversity strategy based on broad acceptance in the business community. A well thought out diversity plan can help defray much of the historic negative feeling in the African-American community about business. This annual luncheon serves as a report card and promotes some of the good news about the successes of individual African Americans in business.

Although progress has been too slow, but African-American entrepreneurs and corporate executives have begun to make their presence felt here in St. Louis and are making a significant contribution to the region's bottom line.

We are delighted that the list of top African-American businesses again goes beyond the usual visible successes to include a host of less familiar, but noteworthy achievers. Yes, these are selected individual achievers and you may debate our choices. And, yes, too few black faces are found in most St. Louis companies. But, these awardees are solid evidence that there are promising signs that things are changing. The future of St. Louis depends on more and more positive change in this area, more and more minority entrepreneurship and participation in the local economy at every level, but in particular in leadership positions.

broad acceptance in both the public and private sectors that increasing substantial opportunities for African Americans in the St. Louis area is a business imperative. This annual recognition luncheon helps as a bridge to greater understanding, and appreciation of shared interests between African Americans and the business community.

Tom Jones, chairman of Citicorp's asset management, global investment and public banking operations, says, "One of the new frontiers for African Americans could be business. Clearly, if America is going to be a more open society, than one of the testing grounds would have to be where the dollar is made, where significant wealth and services are at stake."

It would be shortsighted if enlightened business and political leaders were to fail to embrace and nurture fledgling African-American entrepreneurs. Moreover, well-intended executives must move beyond the common lament, "I'd hire more-

## This Year's Salute to Excellence in Business Awardees:

Entrepreneur of the Year  
Katherine Anderson Andy,  
Seasoning, Inc.

Corporate Executive of the Year  
Mark Darrell

Laclede Gas  
Non-Profit Executive of the Year

Corporate Diversity Award  
Brown Shoe Company

The Area's Top 25  
African American Businesses

ABNA Engineering  
APR/AM  
Com

Capital International Communications  
Conley Financial  
David Mason & Associates  
FUSE  
Interface Construction  
Ivan James & Associates  
Kwame Building Group  
Legacy Building Group  
M-rv Ont". Johnson Home Team Realty

Professional Environmental  
Engineers The Roberts  
Companies  
Sharks & Sharks General  
Contractors The Shurn Group  
TAB. Co. Inc.  
TSi Engineering  
Unlimited Water  
Visions Management  
Group Voka!