

CHAMBER: Group regains financial stability

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But with the convention behind him, Gonzales describes this year's event as one of the most successful conventions the organization ever has staged. Austin was chosen as the venue for the chamber's 25th annual national convention in 1999, well before Gonzales came on board. The chamber chooses a host city five years in advance.

This year, the convention surpassed its fundraising goal of \$1.8 million, bringing in about \$2.1 million. The past several conventions had failed to hit their goals, chamber Chairwoman Tina Cordova says.

Attendance also was higher than at last year's event, with many events selling out.

When Gonzales became acting president and CEO, the state of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber was in question. Half the staff had left, and the organization was in financial distress. Gonzales says the Washington, D.C.-based organization barely made payroll.

"In six months, we managed to turn this organization around," Gonzales says.

The organization also paid off its \$250,000 line of credit.

Gonzales stepped down from his role as chairman in April to become acting president and CEO and to concentrate on planning the convention.

"The amazing part is we turned this thing around," Gonzales says, "and we did it here in Austin."

Cordova says that with all the organizational woes, many people didn't think the chamber could stage a convention. She and Gonzales knew they had to stay focused.

Aside from hitting record attendance and financial numbers, the convention resulted in a first for the organization — a strategic alliance with Mexico in which 14 chambers of commerce in Mexico joined the U.S. Hispanic Chamber's roster.

The governor of Tabasco, Mexico, along with 80 other representatives from around that country, attended the convention during Mexico's Sept. 16 holiday, which is equivalent to the Fourth of July in the United States.

Gonzales says the alliance with Mexico does more than just show an increased interest in globalization.

"It'll help our members. This alliance will promote and foster an environment for minority-owned businesses," Gonzales says.

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AJH PHOTO / SARAH KERVER

The U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce's annual convention added more than \$5.5 million to Austin's local economy. The event also helped the group meet its fundraising goals.

Chamber marks a victory

Convention drew attention, thousands to Austin

BY GISELLE GREENWOOD
AUSTIN BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

Austin public relations executive J.R. Gonzales says holding a successful U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce convention in his hometown was a particular point of pride. The convention poured an estimated \$5.5 million into the Austin area's economy.

But beyond short-term monetary gains, Gonzales — who helped plan the convention as the chamber's acting president and CEO — says the city will benefit in the long term.

Many people who came to the Sept. 15-18 convention never

had visited Austin. Gonzales says he's already heard from two or three people who have expressed an interest in moving to Austin, one of whom owns a high tech company.

Eliza May, president of the Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, says the convention opened up doors for many Austin businesses.



Gonzales

"This convention will have a long-term economic impact," May says. "Businesses will benefit, and it also exposes the city to a wonderful diversity."

For the nonprofit Round Rock Health Clinic, an

exhibitor at the chamber's career development expo, the convention provided exposure not only to young people interested in working for the clinic but to potential donors, CEO Andy Martinez says.

"This provides an excellent networking opportunity," Martinez says. "Being a non-profit, we depend on outside funding. Here, we're able to accomplish two goals — to help our youth while providing a forum to show what our organization is all about."

When Gonzales took over as acting president and CEO of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber in April, pulling off the organization's 25th annual national convention seemed like an impossible task.

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