Longtime community leader reflects on Chamber’s 50 years

by Mary Birch, Lathrop & Gage

What an amazing time for our chamber and our city. As the Overland Park Chamber celebrates fifty wonderful years, it is fitting to pause and reflect about this special place, celebrate all the leaders who made it happen and charge forward with a new vision and direction.

The core values that have made us who we are will not change — excellence in education, public safety, transportation and a bustling economy providing a tax base to support our quality of life and jobs for everyone. This is where for fifty years you have found our chamber and our city in partnership making it happen. When I ponder the types of initiatives lead by the chamber over these many years, it is hard to believe all the work it has taken to bring us to today.

The first is infrastructure. The Chamber supported the widening of College Boulevard and a man with a dream of a place called Corporate Woods. That road changed the economy of a city, a county and a state. Obviously, infrastructure has been a chamber priority over the last fifty years and included major projects such as Quivira, Nall, and Antioch interchanges and the widening of I-435 and U.S. 69 highways, which took about 20 years each to actually complete.

The second would be how our leaders stayed disciplined to the vision established by our founders in the 1960s. Many development projects tried to come to Overland Park. Many were turned away because they did not fit the vision. That took courage and belief. Another visioning process in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the chamber and city and residents resulted in two of our most important programs, our neighborhood streets and revitalization program as well as the formation of the Overland Park Economic Development Council. And now, today, our Chamber and city are partnering again to see where we go in the future.

Leadership development programs are one of the best achievements chambers of commerce undertook in the 1980s. That program continues today and its hundreds of graduates are serving in elected office, appointed office, civic organizations and leading their companies. Leadership Overland Park was the fifth program of its type developed in the country.

There are over 3,000 chambers of commerce in the U.S. and less than 10% have earned Five Star Accreditation from the U.S. Chamber. The Overland Park Chamber was the first chamber in the Kansas City metro area and one of the first in Kansas to be accredited. Additionally, the first Certified Chamber of Commerce Executive (CCE) in Kansas was the president of the Overland Park Chamber.

Community assets such as the Convention Center, Sprint Campus, and over 20 million square feet of office space do not just happen. Stormwater, education bond issues, Johnson County Community College, KU Edwards Campus, government relations staff, the founding of the Convention & Visitors Bureau and on and on and on were so necessary for our success. Partnerships between the Chamber, the City of Overland Park, Johnson County and educational institutions made those things happen.

It would be impossible to highlight all of the contributions the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce has made over the last fifty years. But probably the most important is the contribution and leadership of the fifty chairmen of the Board of Directors who cared about this community enough to help build it and the 60 or so dedicated staff who made it all happen. These are the heroes I admire most. What an honor to have worked with them all!