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# News

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## **Chamber Annual Meeting Underscores Importance of River District Association**

*Keynote speaker highlights downtown as key to recruiting and retaining talent*

January 23, 2009, Rockford, IL: Over 700 Chamber members and guests assembled on January 21<sup>st</sup> for the Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner featuring keynote speaker Carol Coletta, CEO, *CEOs for Cities*. While this was Coletta's first speaking engagement in Rockford, her message was a familiar one—Rockford's downtown is vitally important to our region's ability to attract and maintain young talent. The River District Association, as the only organization in the community dedicated solely to the advocacy and coordination of downtown growth and revitalization, is grateful to have the message reinforced.

Coletta, a passionate expert for cities and what makes them successful, highlighted several interesting facts about young professionals (YPs). Sixty four percent of YPs 25-34 years old decide where they want to live, and then look for work. They want the vitality and lifestyle of downtown living; the urban energy of restaurants, bars, live music, cultural events, social diversity and close living. Communities everywhere are doing the math and realizing that 78 million baby boomers are approaching retirement, or at least career sunset, and only 23 million college-educated young professionals are poised to take the reins. Add to that the tendency of YPs to congregate in urban settings and a very real threat of "brain drain" exists for mid-size cities.

Coletta urged the audience to also consider the following: 2/3 of the 50 largest metro areas lost YPs over the last decade. With that demographic, those areas also lost their future knowledge-based workers, their innovators and the group most likely to be entrepreneurial. It's no wonder that wooing YPs is high on everyone's list for economic development goals, and the River District Association is more vital than ever to Rockford's plan for the future.

"The River District Association has long understood the economic impact a strong downtown can have on the community as a whole," said Kim Wheeler Johnsen, Executive Director. "Hearing the message from experts like Carol Coletta and Rebecca Ryan reinforces our belief that the River District's work is critical to Rockford's future."

The River District Association (RDA) is a private, 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, membership based organization with approximately 500 members. The Association's mission is to promote a growing, thriving, prosperous business and residential community in Rockford's downtown neighborhood. The organization hosts a series of events in the downtown, including urban living tours, historical walk-about and networking opportunities that educate the community about the value of a healthy downtown. Wheeler Johnsen also said, "We educate and rally stakeholders

to accomplish our mission to revitalize downtown. A healthy downtown is a benefit for everyone in the community.”

“The River District is the only organization in the City dedicated to coordinating efforts to make the most of our downtown as an asset,” adds Scott Long, the Association’s Board President. “Without the River District Association, communication, cooperation and ultimately progress in our downtown would suffer.”

However, 2009 presents some real challenges to the RDA. With many companies cutting back, membership dues and sponsorships are down. The Board of Directors are encouraging companies to remember that supporting the RDA is an investment in Rockford’s ability to recruit and retain talent, that can pay big dividends.

“Carol Coletta put it very clearly when she said that a 1percentage point increase in college educated professionals in our community yields a \$230 million dollar increase in gross metro product,” adds Long. “By supporting the River District, you help an organization dedicated to creating the right environment to recruit those individuals to Rockford. It’s a very wise investment.”

There are a variety of ways for organizations, families and individuals to invest in the River District Association. Individual memberships are just \$35, and a variety of business memberships and advertising opportunities exist starting at \$100. The River District Association was recently awarded 501(c)(3) status, so donations are tax deductible. For more information about membership, sponsorship and charitable giving, contact Kim Wheeler Johnsen, Executive Director of the River District at [kim@riverdistrict.com](mailto:kim@riverdistrict.com) or call (815) 964-6221.

### **About the River District**

River District Association's mission is to promote a growing, thriving, prosperous business and residential community in Rockford’s downtown neighborhood.

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