

THE NEXT 100 YEARS

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# TOM BRACKEN LEADS THE CHARGE



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TO FINALLY  
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POTENTIAL,'  
THE NEW  
CHAMBER  
PRESIDENT SAYS

Veteran banker Thomas A. Bracken became the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce's president and CEO in February, taking the reins of the state's business advocacy organization as it celebrates its 100th year. Bracken says the new opportunity to help make New Jersey a better place to live and work has him feeling "recharged."

Tom has been tirelessly canvassing the state, talking to business owners, association leaders, Gov. Chris Christie and just about anybody interested in improving the economy in the Garden State. "We have to stop being so critical about New Jersey and start talking about why it's so great," he said.

He slowed down for a moment or two to sit down and talk to *Enterprise* magazine:

#### **What attracted you to the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce job?**

I've been in business in New Jersey for 42 years and have been involved in economic development initiatives with every governor since Jim Florio [who took office in 1990]. I see the huge potential for the business community of New Jersey and I see how we have never been able to come close to achieving that potential. With Gov. Christie, it's the first time we have an administration with which the business potential can start to be realized. When I was asked to be head of the state Chamber of Commerce, I saw it as an opportunity to be part of the solution. It all just made sense that I shift gears and move from banking to the Chamber. Now is the time for New Jersey to finally reach its full potential.

#### **What is your primary goal?**

My goal is to re-establish the Chamber as a pre-eminent pro-business organization in New Jersey. I plan to work closely with business owners, leaders of other business organizations and governmental entities to grow the business community and turn New Jersey into more of a business-friendly, pro-growth state. The way things work in New Jersey, you need coalitions to

make things happen and any coalition needs leadership. The Chamber can provide leadership to a coalition that will help make a difference. Everybody wins – the state, business organization and the individual businesses themselves.

#### **You were in the banking industry for 42 years before you came to the Chamber. What did you learn in banking that helps you lead a Chamber?**

I received a great education in banking because I interacted with so many customers who are business owners and operators in New Jersey from diverse industries and sizes. I think I have a pretty good idea what they need and what their challenges are. Through the Chamber, we can address a lot of those issues and make those companies feel good about being in New Jersey. We can build their confidence and use that as a springboard for growth.

#### **Why should businesses join the N.J. Chamber?**

They should join for the obvious reasons – our ability to advocate for them, our ability to provide them with great networking events and our ability to help guide them through issues



PHOTOS BY: Ric Principato, New Jersey Chamber of Commerce

## Meet Tom Bracken

**Age:** 63

**Birthplace:** Corry, Penn.

**Home:** Skillman

**College and major:** Bucknell University; graduated 1969, Political Science

**Family:** Wife; Son, Daughter, Daughter-in-Law

**Favorite meal:** Pasta

**Favorite movie:** *The Godfather*

**Favorite book:** *It's Not About the Bike*, by Lance Armstrong, a story about his battle with cancer.

**Favorite vacation place:** Mantoloking, N.J.

such as navigating the government regulatory process, gaining financing and developing new opportunities. This will help business operators grow and run smoother. Utilizing our resources enables members to enhance their opportunities for growth and success.

### How would you describe your leadership style?

I believe in empowerment. I believe in surrounding myself with strong people and letting them use their own styles to effectively do their jobs. I'm not a micromanager. I set goals that everybody believes in and supports. If you have strong people empowered to achieve common goals, things get done. Also, I believe in teamwork. I like flat organizations where everyone is working together in an open and efficient atmosphere. I use email, voice-mail and an electronic calendar, but my style is more face-to-face, phone calls and writing things in my calendar book. I am old-fashioned, slowly converting to technology.

**You serve as chairman of the finance committee of the Cancer Institute of New Jersey Foundation; chairman of the New Jersey Alliance for Action**

### Foundation; and the vice chairman of the New Jersey Network Foundation. Does it get tedious?

No. If you believe in organizations in which you are involved, there is a sense of accomplishment in having a leadership role. I would never join an organization just to have my name associated with it and not do anything. I've seen that happen many times and that is not a positive for anybody. Also, you have an opportunity to interact with some very strong New Jersey business leaders, and that networking is invaluable. A big part of my job is meeting with association leaders, politicians and business owners – and getting us all to pull the wagon in the same direction.

### What drives you?

I have always had the desire to be part of critical initiatives and prominent organizations. I've been lucky in most instances to be asked to have a leadership role. And I've been fortunate that most of the organizations I have been involved in have been successful. That combination of desire to be involved, being asked to help and achieving success gets addicting. I'm always looking for opportunities where I can help in some substantial

way. That has served me well in the past and hopefully will in the future.

### What was your first job and what did you learn from it?

My first job was as a management trainee with a bank called First Trenton National Bank, which was located two blocks from where the Chamber offices are. I have come full circle back to West State Street. I started two days after I graduated from college and I thought I knew everything. As a political science major going into the banking business, I soon realized I knew nothing. I started from ground zero and learned business, banking and how to hone my interpersonal skills. I learned to appreciate what I didn't know. I realized, to be successful, you have to listen, watch and gain experience. It was a good lesson – to learn there is always more to be done, more to be learned. That's never-ending.

### What do you do for fun?

I like to be active. I probably have participated in every sport known to man, which caused me to have a hip replacement. That limited my activities, but I still do a lot of bike riding. I enjoy playing golf, swimming, walking my dog and keeping busy around the house. Anything to stay active. ❖