

Moving Flint Forward: The Chamber's Response to the Water Crisis

By George Wilkinson

In the eight months since the Flint water crisis prompted the first emergency declaration, our city has received a tremendous amount of support. Water donations have come in by the truckload, volunteers have traveled from across the country to help with distribution, and funds have been established to help residents and children with legacy health issues.

While recovery efforts are helping address the city's health and infrastructure problems, the more than 7,000 businesses that call Flint home are too often overlooked. Negative publicity has slowed tourism, and small businesses are struggling with lower customer traffic. Those that depend on water to provide their products and services – such as restaurants, salons, and laundromats – have been particularly hurt.

As I'm sure is true in your community, when lots of businesses are struggling, they turn to the chamber for help. Because the impact of this crisis is wide ranging, our response has been broad. We've provided free bottled water to restaurants and advocated for the removal of the city's lead service lines. We've helped secure SBA emergency loan resources and commissioned a market feasibility study to site grocery stores on the city's north side, where too many residents lack access to fresh foods.

To help shift public perception of Flint, we've rallied agency partners to develop positive messaging about the region's strengths and assets. It will take time but we're aggressively helping restore Flint's reputation as a vibrant place to do business, live, and visit.

From our dozens of visits, a common refrain quickly emerged: the many public and private resources coming to Flint don't help a business facing acute financial challenges today. To help, the Genesee Chamber Foundation (a support organization to the Flint & Genesee Chamber of Commerce) teamed up with the FlintNOW Foundation to establish the Moving Flint Forward Fund.

This fund, housed at the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, helps bridge the gaps between the various government funding sources. Specifically, it provides financial support for small businesses, minority-owned businesses, north Flint redevelopment, and activities that encourage tourism.

We recently awarded the fund's first round of grants to 30 local businesses. They'll use the modest funding to cover such things as new equipment, marketing, façade improvement, product development, hiring, and security provisions. We're excited to help struggling businesses survive a difficult time and look forward to awarding more grants in the near future.

In the meantime, we're challenging our public and private partners to join the movement. To the chambers across North America that have expressed interest in helping, we encourage you and your members to:

- Share the message that Flint & Genesee is STILL open for business
- Plan a conference, meeting or event in Flint & Genesee
- Purchase from Flint & Genesee businesses and suppliers (www.b2b.flintandgenesee.org)
- Donate to the Moving Flint Forward Fund (www.fundsforflint.org)

So while we're a community still in recovery mode, we're an organization that's also laser-focused on continuing the growth of our economy through more visitors, new business investments, and jobs.



George Wilkinson is the Group Vice President of the Flint & Genesee Chamber of Commerce.