

Each month, President Michael Barbalas shares his notes on how the chamber works.



Opening A New Chapter

AmCham-China welcomes aboard our new Tianjin Chapter

When I started at AmCham-China at the end of 2006, I thought the provincial trip program would be a small part of what we do. It seemed like something that would primarily appeal to a few

member companies, but not impact the majority. Two years later, it is clear just how wrong I was. Rather than being a minor program separate from the core of what AmCham does, it has helped redefine how we can effectively serve all of our members. And now we are proud to say that this push beyond Beijing has led to a merger between AmCham-China and AmCham Tianjin.

Before we get to the merger, it is important to explain how we reached this point. Since the initiation of the provincial trip program, our delegations have gone to Anhui, Tibet, Heilongjiang and Sichuan, to name just a few of the more than a dozen trips that we have taken. They have been so popular that we have had to set a maximum of 40 companies in each delegation for purposes of logistics and government access.

And it has not only been the smaller companies, which traditionally have more trouble getting a seat at the government table, that have participated. Large multinationals have shown a tremendous interest as well. Quite simply, our members have shown a huge desire to get exposure in the areas beyond China's traditional business hubs. In turn, AmCham-China has embraced this leading role to help establish and deepen contacts with local government leaders.

Our board's 2007 Long-Term Strategic Task Force recognized the strong push by our member companies to invest and expand their business relationships in second and third-tier cities across China. The realization that so many companies were looking toward medium-sized Chinese markets led the board to examine ways AmCham-China could actively support US businesses in this expansion.

AmCham-China and AmCham Tianjin began discus-

sions about a merger several months ago. For us, it was an opportunity to take some first steps in giving our members a support network in second-tier cities beyond the provincial trips. We saw it as another way to expand our ability to deliver services and benefits to our members in cities outside of Beijing. Similarly, for Tianjin members it gives the advantage of an AmCham with greater reach and additional resources.

Broadening our national structure is a way to expand our value to members across China. Through our provincial trips and the wide reach of our membership, we already have strong contacts in government and business throughout the country. And our existing information platforms such as *China Brief*, *China Bulletin* and our newly re-designed website are extremely useful resources for the international business community. We will augment our current content which focuses on issues at the national and Beijing municipal levels with content specific to Tianjin and other cities in recognition of this growing desire.

We also see opportunities to expand our services such as the health insurance programs and the business visa program to a broader group of companies. These are important for many of our members and will help meet the needs of our newer additions. Furthermore, we will be expanding our government relations reach so that we can be effective both at the central and local government levels. Finally, many of our working groups will expand their focus to reflect our growing membership.

During the past two years, I have learned how important the central, western and northeastern areas of China are to all of our members. We are in the midst of an effort to enlarge the regional scope of AmCham-China to serve and support members in these areas more effectively. The result will be greater value delivered to all of our companies and a stronger AmCham to support US business in China.

Michael Barbalas