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# Chamber holds 100th Annual Membership Meeting

BY DAVID S. RODOCK  
THE VALDOSTA DAILY TIMES

VALDOSTA — Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce staff called 2011 "one of the finest and most successful years we had; it will lay the foundation for years to come."

Hundreds of chamber members attended the 100th Annual Membership Meeting on Thursday afternoon for lunch and words of inspiration and encouragement from keynote speaker Ben Young, associate publisher of Georgia Trend Magazine.

Chamber Chairman Tom Gooding kicked off the luncheon with his review of 2011.

"When I think back on the year, I think of words like exciting, challenging, leadership, courage, vision, integrity, perseverance and most of all, success," Gooding said.

Highlights of his speech included the first economic summit which compared Valdosta to 15 other peer communities and provided participants with thoughts on how to improve their weaknesses in the upcoming years.

Next up was a mention of the Special Ombudsman Response Team (SORT) created to streamline the licensing and permitting process for businesses with local governments.

Consolidation, which was overwhelmingly defeated in the 2011 local election, was touted by Gooding as an "initiative that resulted in what is probably the most meaningful and wide-ranging dialogue our community has ever had on the importance of education in Valdosta and Lowndes County."

He then renewed the chamber's established mission to partner with both school systems to make public education better.

Knowledge-based jobs were offered as answer to the retention of graduates of Valdosta State University and Wiregrass Georgia Technical College. Gooding said 33 percent of chamber members are confident in the success of their businesses and membership has exceeded goals.

Chamber President Myrna Ballard came out swinging. "This is the best chamber in Georgia and maybe in the world. We all know that too much pride can be a bad thing, but it's good to have pride in some things. Pride is what makes us strive to build a better community."

Ballard said that, her in 17 years at the local chamber, she has "never been more proud to work with our chamber than I am now. When we look back on 2011 and consider the chamber's role to build an even better Valdosta-Lowndes County, we are exceedingly proud of our cham-



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Community Unification Educational Excellence Vice-Chair Rusty Griffin and Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce Chairman Tom Gooding are presented the A.L. Girardin Award by Chamber President Myrna Ballard Thursday at the 100th Annual Membership Meeting.



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Sally Bloom, Jeff Hanson and Ken Rickett are presented with an award of gratitude from Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce Chairman Tom Gooding.

ber."

After 30 years of discussions in the business community, she said, they decided to bring the referendum forward for school system consolidation.

"People have asked us why the chamber would take on such a controversial issue," proposed Ballard. "That's an easy question to answer — leadership, good leadership, strong and courageous leadership."

After further discussion about the importance of education and transportation reform, Ballard presented the 2011 A.L. Girardin Award to Gooding and Community Unification Educational Excellence Vice-Chair Rusty Griffin.

"Our board did not remain neutral; they took a strong and courageous stand," said Ballard. "Rusty Griffin and Tom Gooding are not cold or timid souls. They put it on the line for our community. They did not do it for glory or financial gain."

After the presentation, Ben Young took the podium between two ferns to talk about the impact of online media on the maga-

zine business, his family's journalism ties in South Georgia and why writing that focuses on the positive attributes of a community is an example of leadership.

"We try to keep our sentences interesting and readable," he said. "I feel that is something that is missing in a lot of journalistic writing today."

He said that while Georgia Trend is available online for free, customers actually prefer holding a physical copy in print for their information.

Georgia Trend also considers a story's impact on the entire state, not just North Georgia, he said.

"People come back to us because they respect that we will be balanced while staying positive on topics," he said.

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Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce Chairman Tom Gooding is recognized by incoming Chairman Tim Jones for his work in 2011.

