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### Chamber ready to help with oil disaster recovery

Now that the oil spill has been capped and authorities believe that the cap is permanent, it is time for the real recovery to begin.

The ecological impact is obvious. But there is also an on-going drastic economic impact on fisherman, ice houses, fisheries, oil field workers, oil rig supply companies, caterers--the list goes on and on. The spill has not only affected jobs and revenues but also our culture and way of life.

So how can we as a Chamber of Commerce help? How can the partnerships we have established work together on behalf of these impacted businesses? There are several answers to those questions.

One area is in workforce development. Recently the First Planning District Workforce Investment Board (WIB) called together representatives of other economic and workforce development related agencies at Nunez Community College in Chalmette to discuss how we can help and define training or re-training opportunities. St. Tammany was well represented by Jan Robert, our First Planning District WIB representative, St. Tammany Healthcare Alliance Executive Director, Brenda Reine Bertus, our St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation Executive Director and myself. The meeting was led by Melissa Kirsch, the director of the First Planning District WIB, and was attended by representatives of both Nunez and Delgado Community Colleges among others.

On top of the oil spill there are other job losses where retraining may be necessary for the workers to find new employment. For example, there have been layoffs at Michoud and the anticipated major losses at Northrop Grumman in Avondale. However, the good news is that there are also new industries moving in, among them the recent move of Globalstar from California to Covington and several from the film industry moved in throughout our region. Another future job opportunity for displaced workers may involve training in our coastal restoration plan or in green industries. LSU is currently doing a green industry job study that is in its infancy stages. On the Job Training (OJT) is also a very effective way to retrain workers moving from one specialty area to another.

While our chamber's membership is comprised of 85% small businesses that may not have their jobs affected, it is the downstream economic impact of the job losses in the region that are and will continue impact them.

The engines at Greater New Orleans, Inc.,(GNO, Inc.) our 10-parish economic development agency which includes St. Tammany, are revved up as well. GNO, Inc. has held 10 focus groups since the oil spill. It was the

best tool to meet with the fishermen and really communicate one-on-one their dilemma with finding work and replacing lost income.

GNO, Inc. and Chevron have launched an initiative to lessen the economic blow of the Gulf oil spill. Named “Coastal Vitality Project”, it will target those who have lost jobs in fishing, restaurant and tourism fields and include an economic impact study to determine where resources should be invested. Findings will be the basis for a regional marketing strategy to create and retain jobs in existing Louisiana industries as well as emerging fields. The study is also expected to provide a skills survey of the affected work force with the goal of determining what training is needed to keep those people employed. Our partners at GNO Inc. also intend to create an online jobs bank. In addition to job assistance, the effort will support ongoing efforts of the South Louisiana Economic Council (SLEC) and the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, assisting small businesses and marketing southeast Louisiana to interests outside the region. Robin Barnes, formerly the head of Seedco Financial Services, will oversee this new program. She launched the Seedco branch in New Orleans after Katrina and led a \$30 million small business recovery program that supported Katrina affected members in the fisheries, restaurant and cultural industries.

There are still recovery efforts going on in Alaska from the Exxon Valdez handled by a trustee council. For more information--as I am often advised--Google it! You will see that with hard work and true collaboration among Chambers, private industry, economic development organizations, local, state and federal agencies--success can be found after a disaster. With continued support from our membership and together with our economic development partners in the parish, region and state, our Chamber will persevere in this recovery.

For more information on the St. Tammany West Chamber, visit [www.sttammany chamber.org](http://www.sttammany chamber.org).

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