

The Times

February 22, 2009

Now's time to get out and mingle



ANITA T. SHAFER

As this long depressing winter of our economic discontent drags on, everyone is looking for a port to wait out the storm.

But if that urge to hunker down involves hibernating, local business leaders are urging executives, professionals and company owners to resist the temptation. Now, perhaps more than ever, the cardinal rule of networking is being invoked.

"The last thing you want to do is to migrate into a shell because you'll miss the opportunities that are out there," says Michele N. Siekerka, president of the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce.

When it comes to opportunities, the calendars of the local business groups offer many chances to mingle. This year, the recession is bringing a sharper focus to the usual springtime bustle of confer-

[See **SHAFER**, Page D4] ences, dinners and networking gatherings.

For example, the Mercer chamber is launching a series of programs aimed at providing practical advice and assistance to business owners and representatives.

The first session, entitled "Show Me the Money — Strategies on Le-

veraging Your Banking Relationship," is scheduled for March 3 at the Trenton Country Club in Ewing. The idea is to bring together representatives of small and midsize businesses with local bankers and industry experts.

Community bankers have been trying to combat the impression that the troubles of the global financial system have left all banks without money to lend.

Siekerka said she met recently with about 18 bankers who are members of the Mercer chamber, now called the chamber's Bankers Council. "The message is, 'We have money to lend to those that are the right businesses to lend to,'" she said.

That sentiment underscores a key element of this economy that Siekerka calls "the survival of the fit."

"Those that have good business models and strong products and services to deliver are going to be fine," she said. "Those are the ones the banks are ready to support."

In addition to the new events on the calendar, there's a fresh sense of urgency to some more established offerings. For instance, the lineup for the upcoming fourth annual Mercer County Summit scheduled for March 12 will focus on ways businesses can navigate in this economy.

The Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce is joining with Mercer County to sponsor that conference.

For information about events, check out these websites: Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce at www.mercerchamber.org; the Princeton Regional of Commerce at www.princetonchamber.org; and the Metropolitan Trenton African American Chamber of Commerce at www.mtaacc.org.

Although the economy is flagging, leasing activity has been brisk

at the American Metro Center in Hamilton.

The three-building complex near the Hamilton Train Station used to be the home of an American Standard factory. Now it offers 485,000 square feet of Class A office space and it's about 78 percent leased, according to Joel Bergstein, president of Lincoln Equities Group, which owns the complex in a partnership with Meritage Properties LLC.

The most recent new tenant to sign was MediTech Media, which leased 11,750 square feet, according to the center owners. Other tenants who signed new or expanded leases last year include Michael Baker Jr. Inc., an engineering company; MACTEC Engineering and Consulting Inc.; and Infobase Publishing Inc., which provides educational materials.

The companies reflect a mix of health-care, engineering, technology and professional services businesses. They include Consolidated Services Group, a medical claims management company, and offices of two law firms, Flaster/Greenberg and Duane Morris.

Bergstein said the complex's selling points include easy highway access, proximity to rail service and a well-managed, attractive atmosphere. In addition, the rental rates at the American Metro Center can be \$3 to \$4 per square foot lower than those in the Route 1 area, which are in the \$25-\$29 price range, Bergstein said.

Although many of the tenants have relocated from other parts of Mercer County, Bergstein said they have grown since putting down roots at the American Metro Center.

"It kind of is a case study of what can go right in terms of redevelopment," he said.

Contact Anita Shaffer at ashaffer@njtimes.com