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LIFT will jump into local politics

New group wants to promote business

By Rachel Carter

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LONGMONT — A new group in town wants to promote business in Longmont, and its members plan to get involved in local politics to do it.

Longmont Investing For Tomorrow, or LIFT, formed in August to support and promote jobs and the businesses that create those jobs.

But part of LIFT's mission is to advocate for policies and leadership that the group believes will bolster a healthy local economy.

Rick Samson, chairman of the LIFT board, said the idea has been in the works for several months. He and other local business people — including Susan Pratt, a longtime Longmont businesswoman and commercial property owner — started talking about ways to “get new blood involved in the political scene in Longmont.”

“The idea was to see if there weren't some business people out there who were concerned about the direction the city was going and see if there was a unified voice to speak to the city on city issues,” Samson said.

He said the group formed as a response to the current Longmont City Council. LIFT members worry that the council micromanages, listens to only a small segment of the community and is skeptical of business, he said.

“It's a response to council, but I wouldn't consider it an attack,” Samson said. “I think council is in a position of listening only to a few voices, but we want to present another voice that is pro-business, pro-Longmont.”

He added, “We are not after anyone or anything; we are all about the betterment of Longmont on a positive, professional level.”

LIFT kicked off in August and now has about 100 members, he said.

The group is trying to raise \$100,000 by the end of the year for its “war chest” and already has more than \$35,000 promised, LIFT leaders wrote in an August letter soliciting both donations and volunteers.

LIFT will use that money leading up to the 2009 election, in which the group plans to play a role.

Samson said LIFT is a nonpartisan group that will be involved in politics only at the local level. LIFT is not currently supporting any candidates or ballot issues, “but when, not if” it does, the group will use money it has raised to do so, Samson said.

LIFT organizers are asking people to help recruit candidates for the Longmont City Council, research local issues and get residents to vote.

Group leaders also are asking volunteers to act as a watchdog group to the Longmont City Council, including reviewing the council's weekly agenda and organizing people to speak at council meetings.

“We can only change policy through City Council, so that's where we have to stay proactive,” Samson said.

Longmont Mayor Roger Lange said it will be interesting to see what LIFT does during the next year, and during next year's City Council election.

Lange, who was a councilman for seven years before becoming mayor in November, said no matter who is on the City Council, there will be some people who aren't happy with their elected officials.

"If they're unhappy with their representation, get involved and see if you can change it. That's what happened in November. That's what happened in spades," Lange said.

"Obviously, it's a sea change, and it has pleased some people and not others," he added.

Councilwoman Karen Benker said LIFT members are disgruntled about how November's election went.

"They're very unhappy their candidates did not win in November's election," she said. "I think the new council has struck a healthy balance between business and listening to residents."

Benker said the new council is working to create an economic-development department, drafting an economic-development plan and sponsoring a "shop local" campaign.

She also pointed to the quarterly town meetings and monthly coffee chats council members have with residents as evidence of how current council members have reached out to residents.

"I think we've changed the culture of the city so it's more open and inviting to everyone," Benker said.

LIFT also is asking people to write opinion letters and columns to the Times-Call, call the T-C Line and add comments to online articles.

Times-Call managing editor John Vahlenkamp said the newspaper's editors watch for organized campaigns and "copycat talking points."

"While we're happy to be the forum for local commentary, we keep an eye out for letter-writing campaigns," Vahlenkamp said. "To quote what's printed every day on our Opinion page: 'We do not publish letters that are part of an organized effort to flood the newspaper with mail on a single topic.'"

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