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Tampa chamber names first companies for minority business accelerator

By [Richard Danielson](#)

TAMPA — Four firms in marketing, construction and secure cash logistics will be the first to go through a new Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce program designed to help black- and Hispanic-owned companies grow their businesses through two years of guidance.

The program, the Minority Business Accelerator, has been in development for three years. Its initial group of participating businesses consists of Chameleon Custom Solutions, Matcon Construction Services, McKenzie Contracting and MidFlorida Armored & ATM Service.

"When you look at the size of the businesses," those owned by minorities too often tend to be the "smallest of the small," incoming chamber chairman Steven Bernstein said before Thursday's announcement at the chamber's 132nd annual meeting. A chamber study found minority owners run 48 percent of Hillsborough County's businesses, but those companies account for less than 5 percent of the county's business revenue.

"That needs to change," Bernstein said. "We're trying to invest in growing our minority businesses ... so that at the end of the day our business community is representative of our community at large."

Internally, he said, outgoing chamber chairman Mike Griffin and chamber leadership have taken steps so the organization's board and executive committee better reflect the makeup of Tampa and Hillsborough County as a whole. Of the 11 members of the executive committee announced at Thursday's lunch, two are black, three are women and one is Hispanic.

"We're not there yet," Bernstein said, "but we're getting there."

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In developing the accelerator program, chamber members visited similar initiatives in Greenville, S.C. and Cincinnati, which created 138 and 250 new jobs, respectively, in a

single year. [Tampa's program](#) is designed for local minority-owned businesses with at least \$500,000 in revenue, active business plans and well-defined growth strategies.

"That's going to be a game-changer program," chamber president and CEO Bob Rohrlack said, "not just for us, but to the whole community showing that this chamber takes our mission statement seriously, to serve our members and improve our community. Not just us, but the whole community."

Tampa International Airport, Tampa Electric, the Vinik Family Foundation and Valley National Bank (previously USAmeriBank) are the founding sponsors of the program.

With a sold-out crowd of nearly 1,000 on hand at the Tampa Convention Center, the chamber also:

- Outlined its 10-year plan, called Vision 2026, based on three pillars: being a hub for business, being an inclusive organization and being a catalyst for change that can address economically important issues with fact-based solutions.
- Announced that it has received a 5-star accreditation from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. That makes the Tampa chamber one of 112, or less than 2 percent of about 7,000 chambers nationwide, to receive the distinction.
- Gave its H.L. Culbreath Jr. Profile in Leadership Award to former Florida chief financial officer and former Bank of America president of Florida operations Alex Sink.
- Previewed speakers for two upcoming events. On Feb. 15, retired Marine Cpl. Michael Jernigan, who lost both eyes while serving in Iraq, will speak at the chamber's 20th annual Military Appreciation Awards. On April 26, Denver construction company and Colorado Rockies owner Linda Alvarado, the first Hispanic owner of a Major League Baseball franchise, will headline the chamber's Women of Influence Luncheon.

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