

Times Picayune article on the success of this year's National Black Chamber of Commerce Convention in New Orleans

National Chamber convention called hit

**Man firms attending interested in N.O. business
opportunities Saturday, July 28, 2007 By
Greg Thomas**

**Fifteen years after launching a business advisory
company in Virginia, native New Orleanian Robert
Knapper wants to come home.**

**And he came to the Crescent City this week to begin
making the contacts he'll need to open a local branch
of Shimosawa Associates.**

**Knapper was one of more than 350
African-American business people from across the
country in New Orleans this week for the National
Black Chamber of Commerce's four-day annual**

convention at the W Hotel. The event, which concludes today , aimed to help business people network and learn from some of the most successful black entrepreneurs in the nation. But it also attracted small and large firms interested in exploring business opportunities in the Crescent City.

Lewis Smoot Sr. of Smoot Construction Group, a Columbus, Ohio, construction company, said he's had executives on the ground in New Orleans looking for potential contracts.

Smoot is interested in the billions of dollars of pending government, private and public-private ventures pending or under way in New Orleans. His firm started out doing masonry work 61 years ago and is now among the nation's top African-American construction firms.

Don Peebles of The Peebles Group, a Miami

developer who delivered the event's keynote address Friday, is also eyeing opportunities to participate in the rebuilding of New Orleans. Peebles said he is committed to buying some hotels in the city and is planning to build a mixed-use project downtown that could incorporate a hotel, retail and residential space and cost in the "hundreds of millions of dollars."

Harry Alford, president and CEO of the National Black Chamber, said that, with all the enthusiasm about rebuilding, it is time to replace Louisiana's state bird, the pelican, with a different type of crane, like the ones made of metal that will tower over the city as part of the rebuilding effort.

Local businessman Chadwick Kennedy of Kennedy Construction, who is also a local broker for MetLife, attended the event and said participants certainly had their eyes opened to the "misconceptions" about the local recovery.

Jon Harmon, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Trenton (N.J.) African-American Chamber of Commerce, said the convention “was impressive.”

“The variety of industries here, and the (seminars and speakers) inspired, stimulated and lent hope,” he said.

In addition to business opportunities linked to the rebuilding efforts, attendees talked about the changing environment in which they do business. Today's business climate is certainly different from the culture of the 1950s and 1960s when a black firm stood little chance in winning construction contracts, even with the best bids, Smoot said. But minority companies still have to work harder, smarter, better, quicker and under budget in a world that still hasn't achieved economic equality when it comes to business opportunities, he said.

Lewis Smoot Jr. said he keeps his father's decades-old "CHIPP" philosophy top of mind. CHIPP stands for character, humility, integrity, performance and pride, he said.

The Smoot firm has participated in major contracts, such as the construction of Ohio State University's Student Union, a bio lab at Purdue University, and the National League's Washington Nationals baseball stadium in Washington, D.C.

Entergy New Orleans Chairman Dan Packer said the conference was a success and added that 80 percent of the jobs in the nation come from small businesses -- which means good business for Entergy, too.

He added that the commitment of the black chamber to keep holding its annual convention in New Orleans -- instead of rotating among cities -- until the Big

**Easy has been revitalized is
"unprecedented."**