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Austin Gives program encourages area businesses to share profits

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By Gary Dinges
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce today will debut an effort to highlight corporate philanthropy in Central Texas and to encourage more of it.

The initiative — called Austin Gives: Business Giving Back — is to be unveiled this morning by 2011 chamber board Chairman Bobby Jenkins and Austin Mayor Lee Leffingwell.

The measure aims to encourage area companies of all sizes to pledge — via an online form at austingives.net — to give a portion of their pre-tax earnings to local nonprofit agencies.

Firms that agree to give at least 1 percent of pre-tax earnings will be honored at a "community celebration event," where awards will be presented to businesses in three categories — small, midsize and large.

An annual volunteer impact award is also planned.

"Austin businesses have always been supportive of community-based organizations, and I'm pleased that this program will highlight business philanthropy in Austin," Leffingwell said.

BuildASign.com is one of the inaugural Austin Gives participants.

"This is something a lot of companies want to do but don't have the outlet," CEO Dan Graham said.

Philanthropy has been a part of the culture at BuildASign.com since it opened for business in 2006, Graham said. Three of the company's 180 employees focus solely on donated signage.

"I really see this snowballing," he said. "It's a great way to energize your team, help with recruiting and get your name out in the community."

Other area companies that have already signed on, according to the chamber, include 3M, H-E-B, National Instruments, Southside Flying Pizza and the Steam Team.

The Austin American-Statesman is the campaign's media partner in the initiative.

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"The Austin business community really wants to contribute to the overall well-being of the community," said Jenkins, CEO of ABC Home and Commercial Services, another one of the inaugural Austin Gives participants. "That's how we do business in Central Texas — we give back."

Austin Gives is modeled after the Minnesota Keystone Program, founded by the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce. A Central Texas delegation visited Minneapolis in 2010 to learn more about the 35-year-old campaign.

The Keystone Program recognizes businesses that give at least 2 percent of pre-tax earnings annually.

"It works very well for us, and it has become a great model for others," said Minneapolis chamber spokeswoman Linda Sue Anderson. "We get calls all the time from all over the country. There are a lot of people who look to us."

After the Minnesota trip, Austin Gives was born through collaboration between the chamber, Entrepreneurs Foundation, Austin Community Foundation, United Way Capital Area, Successful Giving and I Live Here, I Give Here.

"There's a lot of need out there, and I know a lot of businesses will be willing to step up," Jenkins said.

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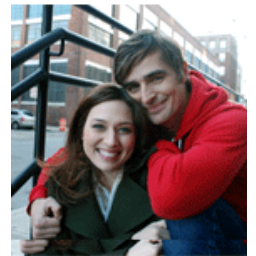
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