

Hispanic chamber seeking research

■ 10-year plan will be outlined to members today

By **JENALIA MORENO**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Wanting to identify issues important to Houston's growing Latino population, the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is launching a campaign to raise \$10 million to fund its own research foundation.

The foundation is part of a 10-year strategic plan that will be outlined to its members today. The chamber paid Suma Partners nearly \$100,000 for the plan, which was developed after surveying more than 1,000 members, stakeholders and community leaders.

That plan calls for the business group to serve as the leader of the Hispanic community, which makes up more than a third of the region's population but represents only 12.4 percent of the area's companies, according to the chamber.

"You can't be the lead if you don't have data and information that backs up everything," said Laura Murillo, the chamber's president and chief executive officer.

She said several of the chamber's corporate sponsors already indicated interest in funding the foundation, which will conduct research about issues such as immigration.

Armed with research, the organization hopes to stimulate business growth among Harris County's Latino population, which was 37.8 percent of the total population in 2005, up from 22.7 percent in 1990, according to the chamber.

"The future of the Hispanic community in Houston is the future of Houston," said Stephen Klineberg, a Rice University sociology professor, who helped the chamber with its demographic data.

For nearly three decades, he's tracked Houston's demographic changes, including the growth of the Hispanic population, and the chamber examined that data as it crafted its plan.

"We are part of the demographic wave," said George Gonzalez, chairman of the chamber's board. "We are going to be part of the solution to empowering Hispanic businesses in our region."

For several years, the chamber struggled, shuffling through two presidents and an interim president in four years.

It "was not an effectively running chamber," Klineberg said.

Last year, Murillo took the helm of the 31-year-old business group. She said its membership increased to 2,600 from 1,600 in the past year. Corporate sponsors increased to 60 from 45 last year, and the chamber relocated to downtown from the Gulfgate area.

"We cannot be all things to all people, but we will be the voice of the Latino business community," Murillo said.