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Economic forum lands Ballmer as a speaker

BY TOM WALSH • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft Corp. since founder Bill Gates surrendered the reins in 2000, is the latest big name to join the list of speakers at the National Summit on economic issues to be held June 15-17 at Ford Field.

Snagging Ballmer is a big step toward establishing the summit as a premier event with national impact, not merely a regional conference with a parochial focus on just autos or manufacturing.

"That's the objective," says Beth Chappell, president of the Detroit Economic Club and the driving force behind creation of the National Summit. "We want this to be a national dialogue, hopefully with President Obama here and CEOs and leaders in technology, energy and the environment, along with manufacturing."

Ballmer grew up in Farmington Hills and attended Detroit Country Day before going to Harvard University, where he met Gates.

Chappell is also courting Meg Whitman, the former CEO of eBay Inc., who is now seeking the Republican nomination for governor of California, to be a National Summit speaker.

Whitman, who appears on the current cover of Fortune magazine alongside the headline, "Can Meg Whitman Save California?" was GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney's finance cochair until Romney dropped out of the 2008 race. In 1995-96, she was president and CEO of floral delivery giant FTD, then based in Southfield. She joined eBay, the online auction site, in 1998 when it had 30 employees and served as CEO until 2007.

If Chappell can corral Whitman as a speaker, she and Ballmer would provide a major 1-2 punch as billionaire high-technology leaders from the West Coast, to provide balance for a speaker list that already includes James Mulva, CEO of oil giant ConocoPhillips, UPS Chairman D. Scott Davis, Delta Airlines boss Richard Anderson, Dow Chemical CEO Andrew Liveris and the heads of the Detroit auto companies.

Along with high-powered speakers, summit organizers plan to soon release details of a concurrent innovation forum, which will bring together entrepreneurs and venture capitalists from around the country.

For more information on the summit, go to www.nationalsummit.org.

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