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FREE TRADE

Business leaders warn of battle over free-trade pacts

Business groups prepare to fight for U.S. approval of free-trade agreements with the Americas.

By Jane Bussey

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A top business advocacy leader urged the business community Thursday to get ready for a tough battle to win approval of free-trade agreements in the Americas.

Promoting the free-trade agenda led the to-do list as representatives of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Association of American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America met for a two-day strategic planning retreat in Coral Gables.

"This is a crisis year [for passage of the agreements]," said Daniel W. Christman, senior vice president for international affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington.

Christman, a retired lieutenant general, said the private sector was facing growing resistance to new trade agreements, including ones with Peru, Colombia and Panama, which haven't been approved. Global trade talks also are currently suspended.

"We have to make sure that we as a business community win the debate," Christman said, adding, "It is by no means clear that we will win."

As the U.S. Chamber of Commerce urged the business group to gird up for the fight, battle lines are already being drawn in Washington over trade. The new Democratic majorities in both houses have raised questions about when and in what form the trade agreements can be passed.

President Bush also wants Congress to renew his authority to negotiate new trade agreements. But Congress is expected to attach strings to any new trade negotiating authority to add protections for the environment, labor and human rights.

In her opening remarks, Kathleen C. Barclay, the chairwoman of the Association of American Chambers of Commerce of Latin America, warned that Congress ``seemed to be putting the breaks on new trade agreements.'

"Asia and Europe are increasingly integrated," Barclay said. "But what about the Americas?"

Walter Bastian, a Commerce Department deputy assistant secretary, called the current problem one of appearances.

"U.S. business has a great message to tell, and we don't tell it," Bastian said.

But Charles Shapiro, principal deputy assistant secretary at the State Department, sounded a more upbeat note: "2006 was a year of elections; 2007 is going to be a year of engagement throughout Latin America, U.S. engagement."

The business event at the Biltmore Hotel coincided with an announcement that Bush would be making a state visit to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico.