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'Urban' group sees membership increasing

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OKLAHOMA CITY – Call it the Downtowners' Club: A group of downtown residents determined there was no reason they couldn't have a neighborhood association like many of Oklahoma City's other residential areas.

Urban Neighbors officially kicked off in May, but the group is actually the second version of a downtown neighbors group that started about four years ago.

The group is made up of downtown residents, businesses, those planning to move to the area and other interested parties.

But what Urban Neighbors considers its neighborhood is hardly a few streets of houses. Instead, the group represents members that live south of NW 13th Street, east of Classen Boulevard, west of Interstate 235 and encompassing the ensuing area south to the Oklahoma River.

Jeff Bezdek, interim president of Urban Neighbors, explained why the group counts the area south to the river.

"We anticipate housing will be built and developed as part of the I-40 relocation plan," he said. "And that is going to become part of downtown."

Bezdek started the group as the Downtown Residents Association four years ago in response to a streetscape project downtown.

At that time, Bezdek said, the city was in the process of creating a streetscape on both sides of the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum. He and other downtown residents wanted a say in the final design.

Bezdek said when the city heard their concerns and ultimately altered the plan, he knew that downtown residents needed to continue to speak with a united voice.

After that, however, membership lagged and a loose collection of residents came together only when there were downtown design issues. The group was made up of residents living in the Regency Tower and the Deep Deuce at Bricktown apartments who were all renting their residences.

"We had a hard time developing a stable membership because most of the residents downtown were renters and so they were transient," Bezdek said. "It

was very unstable.”

Bezdek said things began to change, however, when developers began talking about increasing downtown housing, including The Montgomery, which was originally slated for condos. After living for years in the Deep Deuce at Bricktown apartments, Bezdek said he was approached by several people to jump-start the group in anticipation of new downtown residents, both renters and owners.

The focus then became forming a community and also assembling a group that was passionate about the issues affecting downtown.

“Not only did we need to tackle issues but we also needed to foster community,” Bezdek said. “It’s very easy to live downtown and isolate yourself without mechanisms to meet people.”

Now that the group has officially formed and held monthly meetings since May, Bezdek said each meeting has had between 60 and 150 attendees.

“Urban Neighbors provides a social atmosphere in which we can touch on and influence issues but at the same time meet people from all over downtown,” he said.

The group is registered with the Neighborhood Alliance of Central Oklahoma, which reports it has 390 registered neighborhood organizations around Oklahoma City.

Bezdek said aside from forming a tight-knit community, the group’s members have also expressed what their priorities are. The top issue is a downtown grocery store, followed by transit and pedestrian concerns.

With what Bezdek described as a good relationship with city leaders and a dedicated group of downtown residents, Urban Neighbors will elect directors next month.

“We, as an organization, are trying to not only develop the social fabric of downtown residents but also make downtown more livable and have a higher standard of quality of life,” he said.

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