

Tim Landis: MacArthur Boulevard business group plans mixer

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Apr 05, 2009 @ 12:00 AM

Last update Apr 06, 2009 @ 06:20 AM

Getting to know the neighbors is an important part of fitting into a neighborhood, or in the case of an event later this month, getting the neighborhood behind the idea that the area can be both redeveloped and preserved at the same time.

Going on three years into its existence, the MACARTHUR BOULEVARD BUSINESS ASSOCIATION is planning a "neighborhood mixer" at South Side Christian Church, 2600 S. MacArthur Blvd., from 6:30 to 8 p.m., Thursday, April 30. Dessert and coffee will be served.

Association chairman Cory Jobe said there also will be an open discussion about property values, crime and safety, the effect of the opening later this year of the MacArthur extension and redevelopment plans.

"A lot of people don't know what's going on behind the scenes. They only react to what is visible," said Jobe.

"Until the Kmart or Esquire (theater) are done, they don't think that's success, but we do have some success stories, and we want to talk about that," said Jobe.

He said the event will be "structured" so that it doesn't turn into an air-your-beefs session, but association officers also want to hear specifics from residents of neighborhoods along MacArthur.

"The residents have ideas and concerns. We're going to have sessions on property values, a session on commercial real estate and what it means. We'll also be talking about a land-use plan for later this summer," said Jobe.

Jobe said he hopes the mixer will also draw residents from Leland Grove, Jerome and unincorporated areas along along the boulevard.

The biggest change in decades for MacArthur could be coming this summer or fall, when the MacArthur extension opens between Wabash Avenue and Interstate 72. It will create a major new route between Springfield and areas south, including Chatham.

Jobe said members have learned a few things about getting projects done since the association was started in the fall of 2006. For instance, he said, it isn't sufficient just to complain to developers and owners about empty or neglected buildings.

Developers have to see a way to make a profit. Neighbors wanted to make sure new development is an upgrade.

"We want to make this (a mixer) an annual event, where we can have discussions about what's of concern to them.

"Let's face it. This business corridor is a complicated one," said Jobe.

THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION has scheduled an April 24 bid-letting for lighting improvements on a section of North Dirksen Parkway. The project between Clear Lake Avenue and Bissell Road is in response to more than a dozen pedestrian/bicyclist accidents along the stretch since 2003, including four fatalities.

The agency also has scheduled a June bid-letting for drainage improvements along Wabash Avenue near Interstate 72. The area has been hit by periodic flooding for years, especially as commercial and residential development has spread west.

LITCHFIELD and surrounding MONTGOMERY COUNTY have certainly felt the effects of manufacturing and coal industry layoffs in the past year. A report released last week by the state showed unemployment in Montgomery County at 12 percent in February compared to 9.7 percent a year earlier.

In neighboring Macoupin County, the rate was 10 percent compared to 8.5 percent in February 2008.

One of the responses has been a year-old partnership with the International Trade Center at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville in an effort to help local companies find export markets for their products.

"It's mostly about knowledge and beginning the process. Some of our businesses have begun doing international business that weren't before," said Tonya Flannery, economic-development director for Litchfield.

The next session, scheduled for 2 to 3:30 p.m. Thursday at Litchfield's city hall, focuses on the export market to China and will include representatives from the International Trade Center and the Illinois Office of Trade & Investment. Additional information is available through SIU-E at (618) 650-3851 or the Litchfield economic-development office, 324-5253.

The PEORIA area also has been hard hit by recession, primarily as a result of thousands of layoffs at Caterpillar.

A group called The Heartland Partnership and Peoria-area media have launched a marketing campaign, dubbed "It's Better Here," to highlight the region's advantages. The campaign includes newspapers, broadcast, magazine and billboard companies.

Amy Robbins and Laura Davis have opened APRICOT LANE BOUTIQUE at 2935 Plaza Drive in The Gables.

"We both came from family business backgrounds and wanted to try our own business," said Robbins, who worked in the sign industry. Davis previously worked for an insurance agency.

Robbins said the Apricot Lane franchise of women's and men's clothing and accessories generally is targeted to the 25-40 age range. California-based parent company Country Visions Inc. opened the first store in 2005 and now has 37 in 13 states.

Hours at the Springfield location are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. The phone number is 787-5800, and the Web site is www.apricotlanespringfield.com.

GAPKIDS and BABYGAP join the traditional Gap clothing outlet at White Oaks Mall as of Tuesday. As the names suggest, the expansion adds boys and girls, and infants, clothing to the traditional Gap line. The store is on the upper level, Dick's Sporting Goods wing.

The mall also has begun changing skylight panels to more energy-efficient versions. It's one of a couple of projects to reduce energy consumption and to use more environmentally friendly maintenance, according to the mall.

An update to last week's column on AT&T and the company's U-verse TV alternative to cable. The carrier just announced it has extended coverage to 270 communities in the northern Illinois market, including the Joliet, Waukegan, Crystal Lake and St. Charles areas.

The company is very hush-hush about its plans downstate, including Springfield. But a couple of local hotels have reported lately that AT&T crews are in town making the fiberoptic upgrades needed for U-verse.

The service still could be a ways off, but work has begun.

Copyright © 2009 GateHouse Media, Inc. Some Rights Reserved.

Original content available for non-commercial use under a [Creative Commons license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), except where noted.