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Downtown property owners rally to make progress easier

By Carl Cronan – Real estate editor

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TAMPA -- Property owners in downtown Tampa have formed an advocacy group seeking to help local governments address changes that will become necessary as the business district evolves to include residents.

The Neighborhood Group is comprised of nearly 30 new and longtime landlords and developers, all wanting to simplify the process of working with the city in drafting ordinances affecting future property uses. Member concerns range from longtime matters such as parking to the type of ground-floor shops appropriate for new condominium towers.

The effort is being organized initially by Abbey Dohring, a real estate broker whose family owns buildings on the northern end of downtown, including the former Walgreens drug store being restored at Franklin and Twiggs streets. In advocating the value of available space outside gleaming office towers, Dohring said she wanted to pinpoint key things that would motivate companies to locate within Tampa's central business district.

"The issues were too large to tackle on my own," said Dohring, VP of brokerage and development with The Dohring Group. Her mother, Brenda Dohring Hicks, established the property appraisal firm 10 years ago, when downtown wasn't quite as vibrant as it is becoming now.

Preparing for change

Further development of residential condo buildings and other planned changes are expected to transform downtown Tampa to a district that maintains activity well beyond weekday business hours.

"Everybody has their reasons for doing it, and none of them are the same," said Greg Minder, president of Intowngroup, developer of the SkyPoint condo tower under construction along Ashley Drive just south of Interstate 275.

Neighborhood members want the city to be able to address either long-standing or burgeoning issues related to city living and commerce. Examples include:

"I just want the city to not be afraid of trying new things," she said, adding that city leaders seem receptive to some of the ideas advanced so far.

One idea Hicks has been trying to pitch to city leaders is the use of electronic parking cards that allow car owners to track the time they park in pay spaces and pay by the month, thereby reducing the risk of getting stung with parking citations when quarters aren't handy or run out.

"I just want the city to not be afraid of trying new things," she said, adding that city leaders seem receptive to some of the ideas advanced so far.

Property owners might be willing to pay more special service taxes if they are given more say as to how that money is spent, she said.

Kindred vision

Minder, who was among those attending the first formal Neighborhood meeting in mid-July, said Tampa's downtown operates from a better basis than others around the country where urban redevelopment is becoming a priority.

Other Neighborhood members include Tony Markopoulos, owner of the Floridan Hotel under renovation; Jeannette Jason, a partner in the redevelopment of the Kress Block; and various lawyers, accountants and small business owners.