

# Downtown group sets '98 agenda

■ Alliance will keep focus on housing, retail development

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A year ago, the development of housing in downtown Austin seemed to be a pipe dream. There had been a lot of bluster and little to show for it.

Today, several old downtown buildings are being transformed into more than 300 lofts, and other residential projects are in the works.

"There's been a change in perception about downtown," said Tom Stacy, outgoing chairman of the Downtown Austin Alliance. "In order to bring that about, it's easier when you have a group that focuses on downtown day in and day out. We were there to crystallize the issues and to come up with recommendations."

At the group's annual membership meeting Thursday, the alliance reflected on its progress over the past year and made goals for the future.

In 1998, the group hopes to continue its hot streak, focusing on downtown hous-

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ing and retail development. It also will work on expanding the Austin Convention Center.

"We are at a most dynamic period in the development of downtown," said Bobbie Barker, the alliance's new chair and regional vice president of Southern Union Gas. "We must aggressively move forward."

Beginning as the Austin Downtown Management Organization, the group changed its name and focus in 1996. The alliance and its Public Improvement District, which was reauthorized in August, has become downtown's primary advocate and spokesman, while also focusing on efforts to enliven the central city. Over the past year, voluntary membership at the alliance has jumped 89 percent. Downtown property owners are automatic members and are charged dues, which pay for its activities.

The group has been credited with making a number of improvements downtown, including removing graffiti and sprucing up streets.

It has worked on plans to increase safety and reduce traffic congestion moving in and out of downtown. The group has led ef-

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*Bobbie Barker, the new chair of the Downtown Austin Alliance and regional vice president of Southern Union Gas*

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orts to find solutions to vagrancy. It also has worked to forge key relationships with legislators, hosting the Austin Bash to kick off the last legislative session.

Over the past year, many businesses have moved downtown, increasing the office occupancy rate to nearly 90 percent — the highest in the state.

In September, the alliance helped coordinate a daylong planning session that brought urban experts to Austin for the second time in seven years under a program called R/UDAT, or Region-

al/Urban Design Assistance Team.

"R/UDAT was the icing on the cake this year," Stacy said.

These experts came to Austin with free advice about downtown's future — from transportation to social services. They came up with more than 100 ideas and suggestions and five distinct goals for downtown Austin to accomplish in the near future.

In addition to Barker, new board officers are Vice Chair Will Wynn, owner of Civitas Investments; Secretary Beverly Silas, vice president of Southwestern Bell; and Treasurer Charles Heimsath, president of Capital Market Research.

Other directors elected Thursday were: Barker; Marilla King, vice president of preferred banking at Texas Commerce Bank; Mike Laosa, publisher of the Austin American-Statesman; Elizabeth Ferrer, executive director of the Austin Museum of Art; James McBride, chief financial officer of LBJ Holding Co.; David Bodenman, president of Highland Resources; Terry Boothe, owner of Terry Boothe Commission Co.; C. Wade Cooper, an attorney with Jackson Walker; and Jerry Creagh, owner of Wylie's Restaurant.