

Alliance president takes care of business

by Brianna Bailey

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Cathy O'Connor, president of the Alliance for Economic Development. (Maike Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – As president of Oklahoma City's newly formed Alliance for Economic Development, Cathy O'Connor expects to have a hand in the development of everything from the new MAPS 3 convention center and hotel to bringing more retailers to underserved parts of the city over the next few years.

Part of O'Connor's job is fielding calls from developers and giving advice on projects, she said.

While coordinating development efforts in downtown Oklahoma City is one high-profile part of O'Connor's job, she also studies underserved areas of the city.

"Those areas in northeast and southwest Oklahoma City that are underserved for retail, especially grocery stores, we want to help fill in some of the gaps in those areas," O'Connor said.

The goal of the alliance, formed in April, is to create a one-stop shop for developers and businesses interested in relocating or expanding.

Several cities across the country have set up similar agencies to do their economic development work, including St. Louis and San Diego, O'Connor said.

The alliance and its structure as a nonprofit have drawn criticism because its board meetings aren't subject to open meetings laws.

The alliance's board of directors includes Devon Energy Corp. Executive Chairman Larry Nichols and Oklahoma City Thunder ownership group Chairman Clayton Bennett. The board has a limited role and does not engage in policymaking decisions, O'Connor said.

"Really their job is to hire and fire me and make sure I'm doing my job," O'Connor said.

All of the public entities that the alliance oversees, which include the Urban Renewal Authority, the Economic Development Trust, the Industrial and Cultural Facilities Trust and the Oklahoma Industries Authority, continue to have public meetings.

The alliance is working on creating a website where all of the agendas for the meetings will be posted.

Jane Jenkins, president and CEO of Downtown Oklahoma City Inc., hopes the new alliance will allow Oklahoma City to better compete for new development and growth downtown.

"Every time there is something that is new, it's going to take some time to figure out how it will work," Jenkins said. "I think creating an organization like the alliance is reflective of Oklahoma City's growth. There are other cities that have strong economic development programs like this one, as well."

As projects like the MAPS 3 convention center and hotel heat up, the city will need the alliance to handle all of the administrative tasks that used to be handled by city employees, often at the expense of their normal duties, said Roy Williams, president and CEO of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. Williams also sits on the Alliance for Economic Development's board

of directors.

Prior to the alliance's creation, economic development projects that benefited from city incentives – like Oklahoma City's Dell Inc. campus and the Skirvin Hilton Hotel – were often tasked to city employees to the detriment of their normal work duties, Williams said.

"The whole impetus behind the creation of the alliance is whenever we were working on a project like the outlet mall, the Skirvin, Dell or Bass Pro Shop, City Hall had a role in making all of those projects happen," Williams said. "Whenever those projects came along, it was never anybody's job before to grab ahold of it and figure out how it works."

While the alliance and the chamber have no formal, contractual relationship, Williams said he anticipates the two organizations will work together on different aspects of the city's economic development.

While the chamber continues to handle the city's marketing and recruiting, the alliance will work to make development projects happen once the chamber brings the parties to the table, Williams said.

"The alliance doesn't do any marketing or run a sales program, it's just is the entity that is the deal closer," Williams said.

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