

USA Canoe/Kayak relocates headquarters to OKC

by Brian Brus

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Two kayakers paddle through Oklahoma City.
(Courtesy photo)

OKLAHOMA CITY – The CEO of USA Canoe/Kayak has moved into the sports association's new Oklahoma City office and is anticipating a busy year in preparation for the next Olympic Games in London, he said.

This week's relocation from Charlotte, N.C., culminates plans put into play even before Oklahoma City residents voted on a \$777 million MAPS 3 tax issue two years ago. That temporary 1-cent tax now being collected supports several infrastructure projects, including \$60 million in improvements at the Oklahoma River south of downtown such as expanded grandstands, a new sound system, river beautification elements, permanent sports venue lighting and a whitewater course.

Joe Jacobi, a formerly competitive athlete in the sport, took up his CEO position in October 2009, just seven weeks ahead of the public MAPS 3 vote. The organization had opened its first office in Oklahoma City about the same time.

"On my first day of the job, I actually came to Oklahoma City and spent three of the next seven weeks working with the (Oklahoma City) Boathouse Foundation on the yes vote," he said. "So I had an opportunity to become familiar with this momentum very early on. ... I've been spending about a week per month on average in Oklahoma City since October 2009."

In July that year, U.S. Olympic Committee officials announced that the Oklahoma River had been chosen as an Olympic and Paralympic training site for rowing and canoe/kayak. And earlier in 2009, USA Canoe/Kayak officials attended a Devon Boathouse groundbreaking ceremony as Devon Energy started work on its sports facilities.

MAPS 3 campaign materials before the election did not specifically identify any sports organization expected to benefit from the river improvements. The ballot was even vaguer in its details, earmarking funds only for providing city capital improvements.

USA Canoe/Kayak spokesman Nicholas Olivier said Thursday that the organization's interests in Oklahoma City's river had been developing well before the election.

"Joe Jacobi was in on those conversations with MAPS and the city (officials) at an early point," he said. "I don't know if it was ever written down as a strategic goal, but it had been thought about," Olivier said.

The waterway – referred to as the North Canadian River for all except that mile near downtown – had been stripped to a simple canal by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decades earlier in order to deal with flooding problems. In recent years, activity along the river increased again once as a series of dams was built upstream to provide more water flow. Local colleges have since launched rowing teams and started building boathouses on the shore, with the backing of companies such as Chesapeake Energy and Devon.

Jacobi said USA Canoe/Kayak will be able to pool resources with the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation, which can help marketing and organize innovative events to foster the sport's popularity.

"When you go to the Oklahoma River, you see a very holistic approach to canoe and kayak," he said. "You have programs of all types for all ages in both recreation and competition. We think it's a wonderful presentation of the sport to the public at large ... and Oklahoma City provides a very futuristic view of the sport."

Jacobi's organization oversees 10 paddling sports, two of which are on the upcoming Olympic program. He said several of those athletes already live in Oklahoma City and more will be visiting as the world competitions approach.

"We already have a national team coach who's positioned there and has been in 2009 as well," he said. "You will continue to see that number grow."

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