

City's revitalization gets nod of approval

■ Owners of downtown properties sign petition to extend life of Downtown Austin Alliance

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In the 1980s, a century after Joe Koen opened his jewelry business on Sixth Street, downtown Austin had fallen on hard times. As they flocked to new strip shopping centers and suburban malls, Austinites nearly abandoned the area that had once been the city's economic hub.

Today, downtown Austin is making a

comeback. Brad Koen, Joe's great-grandson and a current owner of Joe Koen & Son on Congress Avenue, credits the Downtown Austin Alliance for much of the improvement.

"Without the alliance, downtown's not going to improve any. You've got to have some government backing to improve downtown," Koen said.

Alliance Chairman Tom Stacy on Tuesday gave Mayor Kirk Watson petitions from downtown property owners supporting the reauthorization of the group, launched by property owners and approved by the council in 1993 to help revitalize downtown.

The original five-year life span of the alliance, which focuses primarily on the area bounded by Interstate 35, Martin

Luther King Boulevard, the Colorado River and San Antonio Street, expires in the spring of 1998. The Hyatt and Embassy Suites hotels and the Austin American-Statesman, located south of the river, also are members.

In addition to promoting economic development downtown, the alliance cleans up graffiti and litter, decorates downtown for Christmas and other events and sponsors free concerts. It has formed the Downtown Austin Rangers, a security force that aims to protect shoppers and business owners and to help tourists. The alliance also has lobbied the council on controversial parking and homeless issues.

As he accepted the petitions, Watson stressed downtown's importance to the city's cultural and economic life.

"Downtown should be the living room of our entire community," Watson said. "Downtown should be a great place to go, stop, shop and be a part of."

About \$800,000 of the group's roughly \$1 million budget comes from a tax of 10 cents per \$100 of assessed property value voluntarily paid by downtown property owners. The group doesn't tap properties worth less than \$300,000, and that amount is abated from all property values when computing the tax.

The alliance receives \$100,000 from the City of Austin, and \$25,000 each from Travis County and Capital Metro.

As part of its original charter, the group must collect the signatures of property owners representing 50 percent of the area's total property value and 50 percent

of its total square footage. Those who sign the petition agree to pay the tax.

The group collected signatures representing 80 percent of the property value and 68.3 percent of the square footage.

"This is the strongest confirmation or approval the Downtown Austin Alliance could have gotten from its constituents," Stacy said.

The council will discuss the alliance's future before the end of the year. Every council member has emphasized the importance of downtown; but at least one, Daryl Slusher, is concerned about the alliance's lobbying.

"They spend an awful lot of time lobbying the City Council, and that troubles me to have a tax-funded group doing lobbying," Slusher said.