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'Create Austell': New social group seeks changes to downtown Austell

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Derek Caffé, a real estate broker and founding member of Create Austell, speaks to the group its inaugural meeting on Saturday, Jan. 14.
Brian McKeithan

AUSTELL — A new organization wants to bring change to downtown Austell by involving neighbors, holding discussions about common issues and advocating for solutions to those issues with the city government.

Create Austell held its first meeting Saturday at Austell Cowork on Broad Street, where around 20 people discussed what they wanted the organization to be and do.

Create Austell was the idea of local real estate broker Derek Caffé and some of his friends and neighbors who wanted to see a more connected community in Austell that could advocate for development downtown. Caffé described Create Austell as a social group first — a way for neighbors to get to know each other and share ideas and issues.

“It’s to be social and to get around projects that will make our downtown more hip, more cool, and more of a place that’s in our image than what we found. Because we found good bones, but it’s going to take a bit of love to get it to where we want it,” Caffé said.

Caffé said the group also wants to act as a source of information for ongoing and planned city projects, because some citizens — especially those who don’t attend every city council meeting like Caffé does, aren’t aware of what the city government is or how to access that information.

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“A lot of people are very disconnected. There’s never been a streamlined source of information, so that’s what we want to be,” Caffe said

After introductions at the meeting, attendants wrote down answers to the prompt: “Wouldn’t it be great if Austell...”

People said they wanted more restaurants, a yoga studio, more bike lanes and no train noise.

“Wouldn’t it be great if that train shut up?” Caffe asked as a train rolled past the window of Austell Cowork, sounding its horn. The same interruption happened several times during the meeting.

Quintasha Swanson, an Austell mom who works for the city police department, said she came to the meeting to see what the group was about. She proposed an Austell recreation center. “There’s just not much for teenagers to do in Austell,” Swanson said, to nods and affirmations from the crowd.

After reading through some of the suggestions, the group had a wide-ranging discussion which included the possibility of bringing more restaurants to Austell, allowing multi-story development in the downtown area, and improving public transportation.

They also discussed how to advocate for change at city council meetings, and received feedback from council members Sandra Leverette and Valerie Anderson, as well as Austell’s Director of Community Affairs Darrell Weaver, who all attended.

“In order for us to know what’s going on, citizens have to come to our council meetings to let us know what they want in the city,” Leverette said.

Leverette and Weaver both said city council meetings are often attended by people who oppose change. Matt Stigall, a founding member who advocates for public transportation as executive director of Cobb 4 Transit, echoed that experience.

“They say things like ‘Bike lanes are communism,’ and ‘We don’t want more sidewalks,’ and stuff like that,” Stigall said to the group. “It’s heartbreaking to hear, but they show up to every meeting. And we just need more engagement for people who want to be for those things instead of against them.”

Natasha Dyer, a founding member who wants to see a more sustainable Austell, said she hopes the group will bring people together across identities and political divides. “I’m excited for a chance to see who’s in my community. Because we need each other,” Dyer said. “I might need a cup of sugar at some point.”

Create Austell’s next meeting will be in February. Find details on their Facebook page: facebook.com/groups/5405566416134644