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Central City welcomes its own credit union

Some deposits will be eligible for matching

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By Leslie Williams
Staff writer

In the past several years, the rebirth of Central City has been most obvious along its main commercial corridor, Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard. The celebrated Ashé Cultural Arts Center and the popular Cafe Reconcile set up shop there, as have other businesses.

Long absent from the mix, though, has been a community-oriented financial institution.

On Dec. 10 that changed with the arrival of the Hope Community Credit Union.

"It's fantastic," said De Morris Walker, a community planner for Concordia LLC, which was hired by the city to develop a community plan for the neighborhood.

"It's a huge deal," said Carol Bebelle, who, with Douglas Redd, established the cultural arts center along the urban corridor.

"Unlike many other financial institutions," Bebelle said, "the credit union's priority is the working class and the poor."

The nonprofit credit union at 1726 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd. is the handiwork of Enterprise Corp. of the Delta, a private, nonprofit organization based in Jackson, Miss., that provides access to financial products and services in economically distressed areas in the mid-South.

Customers of the Hope Community Credit Union, who technically are the owners of the credit union, will be able to open a savings account with as little as \$35, said William Bynum, executive director of Enterprise Corp. of the Delta.

In some instances the money in a savings account will be matched with money from programs such as "individual development accounts," Bynum said.

An individual development account is a savings account that provides matching money for low- and moderate-income people. In the past, it offered \$4 for every \$1 saved toward buying a home and \$2 for every \$1 saved for business or education.

The need for "pay-day lenders," and "pawn-shop loans" should dwindle, he said, adding that "access to affordable credit is a fundamental right."

The community-development credit union at the corner of Oretha Castle Haley and Felicity Street will be able to use more flexible qualifying criteria for consumer loans, Bynum said. Credit union members should have an easier time getting money to buy a house with lower-than-normal down payments and mortgage fees, he said. Also, the credit union will have more flexibility when determining who qualifies for a mortgage.

"It's a real blessing for the neighborhood," said Craig Cuccia, executive director of Cafe Reconcile. "It'll improve financial literacy in Central City and ultimately help with economic development here."

Traditional financial institutions go to wealthy areas and stay away from low-income areas, Bynum said.

"Our objective is to help people pull themselves up," Bynum said. "Credit unions pool their resources. My dollar plus your dollar make money available to others."