

The **MacARTHUR** BOULEVARD BUSINESS ASSOCIATION has met once, has no officers and no bylaws.

But the group does have a mission: preserve the residential/commercial north end of one of the city's busiest routes. An initial meeting last month drew more than 30 business owners from along the corridor.

A project kicked around for years and scheduled to begin next spring - extension of **MacArthur** Boulevard from Wabash Avenue to Interstate 72 - was the immediate spur to formation of the group.

For better or worse, there's an expectation the extension will significantly affect commuter and shopper travel habits between Wabash and South Grand Avenue when completed in 2009.

"A lot of them (business owners) are wondering what's going to happen on the north end when that goes through," said Jake Gronewold, who manages entrepreneurship programs for the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce.

The idea for a **MacArthur** Boulevard association came through a chamber small-business committee, and Gronewold helped coordinate the first meeting.

Discussion centered on possible uses for the old Kmart building at 2115 S. **MacArthur** Blvd. The building has been vacant since the store closed in early 2003, though portions have been used for temporary sales.

Among the suggestions: a grocery store, space for the YMCA, a call center or breaking it up into office space.

There was a proposal last year to fill in another of the larger vacancies along South **MacArthur** - the former home of the Esquire Theatre, which also closed in 2003. A plan for an upscale shopping center, including a natural-foods grocery store, on the site at **MacArthur** and South Grand Avenue never got beyond the blueprints.

But support from residents of nearby neighborhoods and business owners was a good indication of what they have in mind for the boulevard.

Gronewold said the business association probably will remain affiliated with the chamber, but intentions are to create an independent organization. The next meeting is scheduled for 7:30 a.m., Thursday, Jan. 11 at the American Red Cross, 1045 Outer Park Drive.