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ARTSNET changes name

Bedford-based ARTSNET has a new name: Arts Council Northeast. The name change is effective immediately.

Council President Cathy Hernandez said, "We are excited about the new name and feel that it is more reflective of our purpose as an arts council, which is to encourage, support and facilitate artistic cultural opportunities within the communities of North Tarrant County."

Founded in 1975 as the Trinity Arts Foundation, ARTSNET evolved from the Trinity Arts Guild. Since 1997, the non-profit has granted more than \$600,000 with a match totaling more than \$1.2 million for the arts in North Tarrant County. These grants support art programs for at-risk youth, school children, children who have lost loved ones, senior citizens and emerging arts groups. ■

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Focus | Real Estate

Acme takes cue from 1980s, cuts production in downturn

BY ALESHIA HOWE

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There was no slow decline for Fort Worth's Acme Brick Co. when the housing market began heading south in 2006. In fact, Acme CEO Dennis Knautz said orders came to a screeching halt in one month's time: July 2006.

In that one month, Knautz said orders for his company's bricks - used in a variety of buildings, but heavily in residential construction - dropped 27 percent. And then they continued to fall.

Knautz said the company took the lessons learned from the 1980s recession to take a proactive stance and make some tough decisions.

Since that time, as the housing market has continued to struggle, Knautz said his company has worked hard to position itself to wait out the current recession. But that hasn't come without some big changes in the company.

Since July 2006, Acme Brick has temporarily closed 13 of its southwest plants - many of them in Texas - and has cut 1,300 jobs, most of those from the company's production line.

"When the brick business or construction business is going gangbusters, there's not enough bricks to go around, so there are shortages," Knautz said. "Shortly after 1983, our strategy was to build some inventory, since brick has no shelf life issue, to be prepared for when the market recovers. We didn't know that would take five



Since 1891

years and we had to carry that inventory for a long time and at those interest rates, it was not the best economic situation."

Knautz said he and his company learned from the late 1980s real estate bust in Texas - so much so that the company knew what would have to happen for it to survive.

"We've been through these cycles before," Knautz said. "... We've learned from our business, being cyclical as it is, how to get big and how to get small over and over again. And right now we've had to get small."

In fact, Knautz said Acme is operating at 40 percent capacity currently, taking into account its 13 shuttered plants. Locally, Acme's Denton plant continues its operations as well as one of the two Malakoff plants. But the plants in Bennett and Bridgeport have closed, whittling the number of Acme plants in the Southwest United States down from the 24 operating

in 2006 to 11 currently.

"We were blowing and going to replenish and stock products in '05 and '06, and we ended up with excess inventory that we didn't want to be saddled with for several years," Knautz said. "So we began to ratchet down pretty quickly. That took us three years, but just last year we started selling more than we were producing."

Knautz said as the industry begins a recovery and as brick orders pick up, Acme will likely add that increased production rate to its operating plants before it opens any of the idle plants.

"It may be several years before those idle plants start to open," he said.

Knautz said when the shuttered plants do open, finding skilled - or semi-skilled - workers might prove to be a challenge. In 2005 and 2006, Knautz said Acme took advantage of a U.S. visa program for semi-skilled seasonal workers to come to Texas from Mexico as employees.

"From a hiring standpoint, it's hard work to find workers," Knautz said. "I think finding workers will be a challenge for us and will take a long time. We have to make sure they are legally employable, they have to pass a drug screen and several other key factors and those take time."

Comparatively, Knautz said though his company currently is down to 40 percent productivity, in 1988 Acme Brick operated with a production rate of 67 percent. At the end of the 1980s, he said Acme closed three plants permanently.

"Things are different now than they

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were then," Knautz said. "Then we closed three plants after running in overdrive. Today, we're temporarily closing plants, hoping we don't have to walk away from any of our capacity."

In addition to slowing its production, Knautz said Acme also is making an effort to delve into other product lines to diversify the company. Besides bricks, Acme currently sells block products, natural stone, fireplace inserts and floor and wall tile as well as VAST products, an energy efficient paver option just added late 2009.

"If you think about it, brick doesn't have much of a remodeling market, but some of the other products like VAST and the floor and wall tile do, so we're looking at those and that entire segment as an area we can move into more as remodeling is picking up some speed in light of new home building winding down," he said.

In the mean time, Knautz said Acme will continue with business as usual in this downturn until the market corrects, waiting on an increase in housing permits, followed by housing starts as indicators the market is picking up.

"We are watching those two measures very closely," he said.

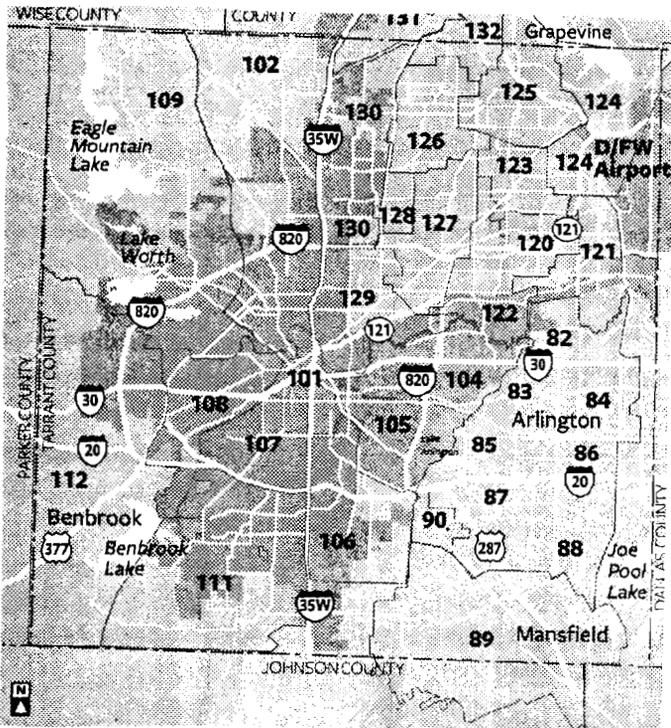
Acme is owned by Berkshire Hathaway Inc. and according to Berkshire's annual report, the mega company gained a net worth of \$21.8 billion in 2009. The company added Fort Worth's Burlington Northern Santa Fe to its holdings in 2009. ■

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REAL ESTATE

North Texas home sales fell in February, but median price up



Area	Sales	Percent change year ago	Median price	Percent change year ago
82 NE Arlington	20	-9%	\$152,500	-9%
83 West-central Arlington	23	+10%	\$154,000	+43%
84 East-central Arlington	12	+9%	\$46,000	-16%
85 Arlington, Dalworthington Gardens, Pantego	28	-10%	\$125,000	-4%
86 SE Arlington	13	+44%	\$75,500	+23%
87 Far SW Arlington	37	+42%	\$143,000	-4%
88 Far SE Arlington	62	-14%	\$118,000	-6%
89 Mansfield	57	+10%	\$165,000	+9%
90 Kennedale	2	-33%	\$213,250	+96%
101 Downtown Fort Worth	4	+300%	\$322,450	+37%
102 Saginaw/Fort Worth north side	58	-22%	\$126,500	+2%
104 East Fort Worth	30	-9%	\$78,500	+3%
105 SE Fort Worth (Rosedale)	19	-10%	\$23,000	+4%
106 South Fort Worth (Everman/Forest Hill)	27	+29%	\$54,500	-8%
107 West-central and SW Fort Worth (TCU)	26	-13%	\$175,100	-11%
108 West-central Fort Worth	31	-9%	\$232,040	+6%
109 NW Fort Worth (Eagle Mountain Lake/River Oaks/Azle)	79	+32%	\$121,950	+13%
111 Fort Worth (south of I-20/Crowley)	92	-4%	\$107,100	+7%
112 Far west Fort Worth (Benbrook/White Settlement)	58	+41%	\$106,500	-3%
120 Bedford	24	+29%	\$150,500	+1%
121 Euless	31	+29%	\$158,700	-9%
122 Hurst	29	+4%	\$142,000	+5%
123 Colleyville	23	+5%	\$385,000	-11%
124 Grapevine	30	+50%	\$249,000	+5%
125 Southlake	16	-6%	\$496,250	+8%
126 Keller	40	-5%	\$247,750	-15%
127 N. Richland Hills/Richland Hills	43	+5%	\$145,000	+16%
128 Watauga	14	-13%	\$94,500	0%
129 Haltom City/Riverside	13	-19%	\$62,500	+22%
130 Fort Worth Summerfield/Park Glen	114	+7%	\$148,360	+2%
131 Roanoke	10	-9%	\$143,000	-24%
132 Trophy Club/Westlake	12	+71%	\$277,000	-46%

Source: Real Estate Center, Texas A&M University

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SALES TAX

Arlington sees bump in revenue

Statewide, January sales tax revenue declined 8.8 percent.

By AMAN BATHEJA and SUSAN SCHROCK
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Arlington bucked the trend of most other large cities and saw a recent bump in sales tax revenue, according to figures released by the state Wednesday.

The state comptroller's office reported collecting \$1.6 billion in sales tax revenue from transactions in January, down 8.8 percent compared with the same period in 2009. The drop is an improvement over trends from last year.

"After eight straight months of double-digit declines, sales tax losses have begun to moderate," Comptroller Susan Combs said.

While revenue for Texas cities was down 6.8 percent on average, Arlington's jumped by 5.4 percent, the second-biggest gain among the top 20 largest cities in Texas. Round Rock had the largest gain in that group.

Football games at Cowboys Stadium and the popular Arlington Highlands shopping center are credited for the city's January sales tax boost.

"It's the entertainment district activity, it's the restaurant activity. Those things contributed to the positive number," City Manager Jim Holgersson said. "Thank goodness for the stadium and thank goodness for the restaurants in the Highlands."

Before figures for January came out, Arlington officials expected sales tax collections for the fiscal year to be down about 3.6 percent. Now, Holgersson said he believes that the gap will be about \$100,000.

Arlington is working to reduce expenditures and maintain 52 employee position vacancies to keep the budget in the black. Holgersson believes that with careful planning Arlington will have a little over \$500,000 left at the end of the budget year.

"There is no need for a budget adjustment yet," Holgersson said, unlike 2009's midyear budget cuts.

The news is not as great for fiscal 2011, Arlington City Council members learned Wednesday.

The city is projecting a \$5.7 million shortfall, and that does not include employee pay raises, Holgersson said. City officials are looking at ways to reduce spending to narrow the gap and will give the council an update in May.

"We know about it. We have time to work on it," Holgersson said.

Fort Worth suffered a 4.7 percent drop in sales tax revenue, far worse than December revenue, which was down less than 1 percentage point.

"It's nothing to be happy about, but it's in line with what we were expecting," said Horatio Porter, a city budget officer.

Porter said a recent revision by city staffers assumes that sales tax revenue will be down through the rest of 2010.

"Obviously we're hoping that the recovery kicks in pretty soon, but in an attempt to be cautious and conservative, we're just expecting them to be down from last year," Porter said. "We haven't gotten any indication that things are about to recover."

Benbrook's sales tax revenue dropped 24 percent, one of the largest declines in Tarrant County. City Manager Andy Wayman said he hadn't seen the comptroller's report but could guess the cause. "We haven't lost any businesses, so I suspect we're like everyone else subject to the recession and feeling those effects," he said.

Sales tax makes up a substantial part of revenue for cities. Many municipalities are expected to cut spending in next year's budgets. City officials are closely watching their sales tax revenue to determine how big those cuts will need to be.

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January sales tax revenue
 City % change from Jan. '09

Austin	1.76
Arlington	5.43
Bedford	8.85
Benbrook	-24.39
Blue Mound	36.72
Colleyville	0.55
Crowley	-3.32
Dalworthington Gardens	7.40
Dallas	0.79
Edgecliff Village	153.74
Euless	-16.35
Everman	-34.74
Forest Hill	-3.22
Fort Worth	-4.70
Grand Prairie	-13.96
Grapevine	-8.13
Haltom City	-3.23
Haslet	-1.94
Houston	-11.54
Hurst	-6.78
Keller	-0.20
Kennedale	5.55
Lake Worth	-6.24
Lakeside	30.35
Mansfield	-1.81
North Richland Hills	1.65
Pantego	-24.14
Pelican Bay	240.30
Richland Hills	-7.73
River Oaks	-8.65
Saginaw	-4.99
San Antonio	-1.38
Sansom Park	10.08
Southlake	0.88
Watauga	3.08
Westlake	50.80
Westworth Village	0.42
White Settlement	-8.38

Source: Texas Comptroller

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JAILHOUSE INTERVIEW

Euleless man who is accused of murder says it was self-defense

Prosecutors say Jason Walker stabbed Wesley Taylor after an argument.

By DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR.
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FORT WORTH — Jason Walker, Wesley Zane Taylor and Traci Najera stood in a Euleless apartment last May, drinking, talking and arguing.

Within minutes, Taylor, 33, was dead on the floor, Walker ran to a nearby Waffle House, and Najera waited for Euleless police. That much is undisputed.

But the details of what happened on the morning of May 20 are what will determine the future of the 39-year-old Walker, who has been charged with murder in Taylor's death.

Walker spoke about the death last week in the Tarrant County Jail, where he has been since his arrest in May. His bail is set at \$75,000.

A few days ago, Walker said, he turned down an offer from Tarrant County prosecutors to plead guilty in exchange for a 20-year prison term.

"I was in my home defending myself," Walker said. "My girlfriend and I had had an argument, so she brings home this guy to beat me up.

"I didn't want any part of a fight. I packed my bags and was ready to leave when he pulled out a knife and she also had one."

Walker said he grabbed a kitchen knife and poked at Taylor as he headed out the door.

But Euleless police say that although there was an argument, Walker stabbed Taylor more deliberately than that.

Walker "got into an argument with his girlfriend," Euleless police Lt. John Williams



STAR-TELEGRAM/KELLEY CHINN

"My girlfriend and I had had an argument, so she brings home this guy to beat me up," Jason Walker said. "I packed my bags and was ready to leave when he pulled out a knife and she also had one."

Crime Time

For more crime news, go to star-telegram.com/blogs

said. "Then the victim was stabbed."

Walker's trial date has not been set. If convicted, he faces a maximum of life in prison.

His attorney, Pia Rodriguez of Arlington, was in trial Wednesday and could not be reached for comment.

Drugs and violence

Walker was born in Arlington and raised in Tarrant County. He dropped out of Grand Prairie High School, but he earned a GED diploma, he said. For years, Walker worked in construction, hanging Sheetrock, he said.

He spent time in prison for cocaine possession about nine years ago, but he has been clean since, he said.

Walker said that was his only trouble with the law, but Tarrant County criminal court records showed that he also

went to jail for evading arrest in 2006.

In early 2009, he started dating Najera. Court records indicate that she has been sent to prison twice on drug charges.

Najera, 36, could not be reached for comment.

"She has a methamphetamine problem, and I thought I could help her," Walker said. "But we were always arguing about it, and that's what happened that morning."

On May 20, Najera left the Euleless apartment they shared after an argument, he said.

"She's driving around and picks up this guy," Walker said.

Walker believes that his girlfriend intended for Taylor to beat up Walker.

According to Euleless police, Najera had picked up other men before and brought them to the apartment.

Walker said he was standing in the kitchen when he was confronted by Najera and Taylor. Taylor punched him a few

times as he opened up a switchblade.

"I'm not a violent man," Walker said. "I grabbed a knife, scrambled to get past them and as I'm trying to get out, I poked at him with the knife."

'Fighting for my life'

An autopsy by the Tarrant County medical examiner's office showed that Taylor was stabbed five times in the chest and forearms and cut several times on his legs.

Among Taylor's tattoos were a swastika, "Aryan Circle" and "Fear No Man," according to the autopsy. Taylor had amphetamine and methamphetamine in his system.

Taylor had been to prison in Texas. He was first sentenced to five years in 1996 for burglary of a building in Tarrant County and released in 1998. His parole was revoked, and he returned in February 2000 and was released in 2001.

Taylor was then sentenced to four years in prison in December 2005 for having a prohibited substance in a correctional facility in Jones County near Abilene. He was paroled in March 2009.

Walker said Najera has not told the true story of what happened.

"She's afraid that if she doesn't say what police want to hear, she'll go back to prison," Walker said. "She's told them I flipped out and stabbed him, but that's not what happened."

Walker expressed remorse for what happened.

"I didn't mean for it to happen," he said. "But I was fighting for my life."

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