

Stretching away the workday in King of Prussia

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When they showed up at the happy hour, they weren't wearing their office clothes, but sweats and tights. Nor were they drinking lagers and downing wings. Instead, they were contorting themselves, becoming at turns a Downward Facing Dog or a Half Lord of the Fishes.

The 90 or so had gathered at 5:15 p.m. Tuesday at a nondescript office complex in King of Prussia for a "Yoga Happy Hour," a twist, bend, and stretch on a long-standing American tradition.

The summertime yoga class and networking social draws scores of frazzled office workers, who change from business casual to sweat-friendly and stretch for 45 minutes on an office building patio in Upper Merion Township.



90 people participate in outdoor yoga practice, put on by King of Prussia District and Stillpoint Yoga Studio, held outside the Maschellmac Office Complex on June 24, 2014. (MATTHEW HALL / Staff Photographer)

Participants pose and meditate on colorful yoga mats and then nibble on organic appetizers. As many as 100 have attended the free event at the Maschellmac office complex on First Avenue, down the road from the Valley Forge Convention Center.

"It's a stress release that is more fun when you are outside with a bunch of people," said Jen Hawes of Phoenixville, an office manager at Palmer Theological Seminary in the complex.

The happy hour is an effort to boost quality-of-life offerings in King of Prussia. It is a project of the King of Prussia Business Improvement District, a four-year-old private nonprofit whose goal is to improve the business climate within its 1,900 acres. The effort is funded by King of Prussia's 296 commercial-property owners.

"Most people associate employment in the suburbs with not a lot of excitement," said

Eric T. Goldstein, the district's executive director. "It's the old, outdated idea of the 1970s and '80s office park."

His group is trying to change the image of King of Prussia as only a place to work and shop. In addition to creating activities, it seeks to expand public transportation, and is lobbying for zoning changes that could turn an office park into a social hub, where workers and residents could walk and shop, and visit coffee shops and restaurants.

Then, the 58,000 who work in Upper Merion Township, where the workforce is about double the population, might just stay around past quitting time.

"We want them to feel connected to the community they come to five days a week," said Brooke Hersh, district spokeswoman.

The yoga class is one of several events aimed at enhancing recreational activities. The district also hosts a free lunchtime concert (the last of the season is Thursday on the lawn at 900 First Ave.) and an annual beer fest in October.

On Tuesday, about 90 people stretched on the patio under the summer sun and a cooling breeze.

Teacher Pat Yomcheck made the group of women and about 10 men feel at ease.

"I was born in 1941, the year of Pearl Harbor. On a good day, the scale says 155 pounds," Yomcheck told the class. "I'm telling you that so you know we want *everybody* here - every size, every shape."

Yomcheck teaches at Stillpoint, a cosponsor of the event, along with Lululemon Athletica clothing shop, Wegmans supermarket, and CSL Behring, a biotherapies company, all in King of Prussia.

The yoga studio's owner, Dianne Rutstein, who formerly worked as a manager in a nearby office building, helped design the class with the harried employee in mind.

"We're doing a lot of stretches, strength- and flexibility-building, and some of them can be done in their offices," Rutstein said.

During the session, the class posed languidly to soothing music, including a bit of Bob Marley.

"When problems come up, yoga helps you let them slide by," said longtime practitioner Narinder K. Garg, a financial consultant, who was one of the few men to take the class. Garg, who owns a small office building on Route 202, is one of the businessmen who pay to support the district. He called its mission "a good one."

After a deep closing breath and a "namaste" farewell, Garg and his fellow students rolled up their mats and walked over to the class' version of the "bar" for some networking.

On the menu: spinach-strawberry salad and water - with a shot of fruit flavor.