

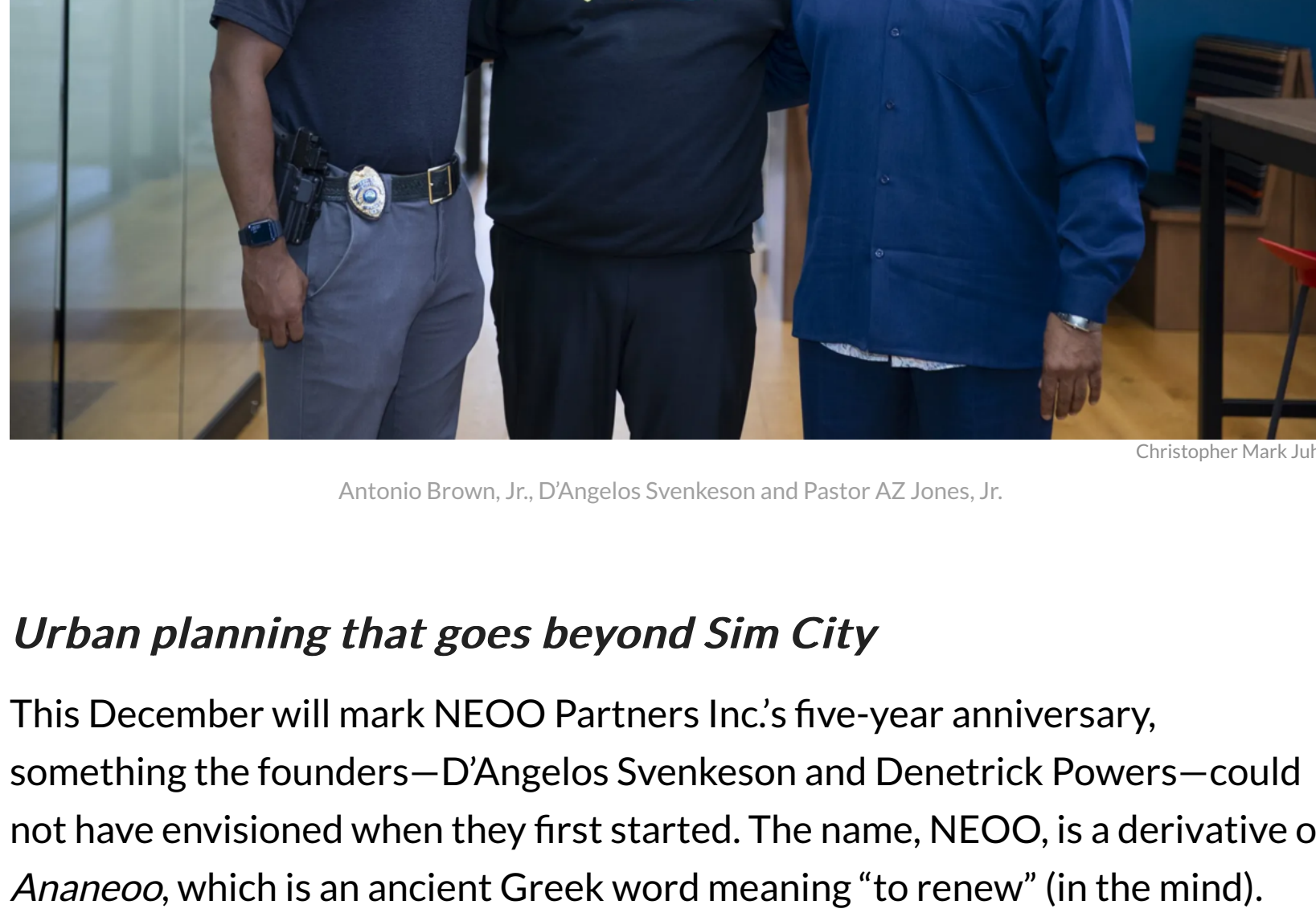


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Black Business Spotlight: NEOO Partners

by [Gino Terrell](#) — August 25, 2023

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Antonio Brown, Jr., D'Angelos Svenkeson and Pastor AZ Jones, Jr.

Urban planning that goes beyond Sim City

This December will mark NEOO Partners Inc.'s five-year anniversary, something the founders—D'Angelos Svenkeson and Denetrick Powers—could not have envisioned when they first started. The name, NEOO, is a derivative of *Ananeo*, which is an ancient Greek word meaning "to renew" (in the mind).

"For us," co-founder, Denetrick Powers explains, "its meaning is related to inward reformation or transformation, which is reflected in how we choose to approach the work we do in community."

The creative commercial real estate development and urban planning firm was started in 2018. At the time, Svenkeson noticed that a number of small Black businesses in the Twin Cities had been duped into entering contracts that took advantage of them with commercial lease rentals.

As a result, he and his partner launched NEOO Partners to help combat deceptive real estate practices. Since then, they have expanded their clientele to include nonprofits, government agencies, and community engagement for development projects.

In addition to commercial real estate and planning, the team of 23 at NEOO Partners takes on transit planning projects as well, connecting other BIPOC contractors and consultants to clients, which in turn creates more jobs. The partnership's list of clients and projects includes Ramsey County, Minneapolis' Upper Harbor Redevelopment project, a downtown redevelopment project in Brooklyn Center, a golf course development in Duluth, as well as the Victoria Theater Arts Center and the Neighborhood House projects in St. Paul.

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, NEOO Partners, like many small businesses, faced tremendous adversity. That year they lost 90 percent of their projected income, he said. However, the firm would go on to bounce back and be stronger than ever by the end of 2021. While it may seem like the toughest obstacles are behind them, the prospect that the Twin Cities, like much of the nation, could be headed towards a recession looms large.

This year, however, the company's work was recognized. Recently, the Metropolitan Economic Development Association (MEDA) named Svenkeson "Entrepreneur of the Year." The announcement was "shocking," Svenkeson said.

"I didn't have a strong relationship with them. It wasn't like a friend that was giving me the award," Svenkeson said. "It's a testament to the people on the team and me working in the community."

With NEOO Partners expanding their clientele, Svenkeson is projecting that in the next three to five years they could be in a position to do more than just help clients. He'd like to begin taking steps to create and implement their own solutions to further benefit the community at large. To do so requires leadership and perseverance.

Svenkeson's leadership skills and work ethic are qualities that he developed as part of growing up in St. Paul's Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods. While part of his childhood includes fond memories spending time at the neighborhood Martin Luther King Recreation Center and learning life-lessons from family members, there was also a video game that taught him something valuable. It was Sim City, a city-building simulation video game.

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"It taught me that everything is interconnected," Svenkeson said. The popular video game showed him that there are always tradeoffs, and that decisions have consequences. Logistics such as where to build a business is important as it plays a role in whether it's easy for employees to commute to the workplace.

"I transitioned from thinking of a business as separate to thinking of a business as an organism [that's part of an ecosystem], to a biologic approach," Svenkeson said. Adapting to that way of thinking is why he changed his major in college. He initially studied real estate at St. Cloud State University and later made a change and enrolled in the school's planning program.

"The real estate program didn't answer the 'why' when it came to addressing policies in the Black and Brown community," Svenkeson said. Earning a scholarship to play football at St. Cloud State University was also part of his plan, and he saw his hard work pay off.

"My uncle Carl Brown came up with a plan for me when I was 13 years old," Svenkeson said. The plan centered around his football journey and how that ultimately led him to develop the discipline and habits that have helped him succeed.

Svenkeson credits his uncle for teaching him how to train his body and mind to reach his goals. He remembers his uncle saying, "Honor the process," which has become something of a mantra for his approach to his business.

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Svenkeson followed through with the plan and landed scholarship offers to play college football, ultimately choosing St. Cloud State University. He would later earn his master's in urban and regional planning at Jackson State University, a historically Black university (HBCU), where he was only a two-hour drive from extended family living in Greenville, Mississippi. His familiarity with the surrounding community, in part, led to opening NEOO Deep South in Jackson, Mississippi, in the spring of 2021.

"An opportunity presented itself to work with an outstanding local entrepreneur who had purchased a significant amount of land near downtown Jackson and was planning to bring some transformational programs and opportunities related to technology to the local community," explained co-founder and NEOO's Director of Planning and Engagement Denetrick Powers. "Our work in the Deep South continues in recognizing that there are predominantly BIPOC communities around the South that also have aspirations for transforming their communities and could benefit from the services we provide."

Svenkeson has taken this business model and passion for community development and is making an impact in the leadership of the firm, something he doesn't take lightly.

"It's a dynamic thing. Being a leader of a team is different than leading a project for a client. All in all, it takes a set of skills," he said. "The journey of leadership is the biggest challenge."

He recalls consistently being a leader, whether by volunteering or being chosen, in some capacity since he was in grade school. It's a position he is honored to be in. Along with leadership, Svenkeson has had mentorship roles as part of the African American Leadership Forum and with the youth at his church.

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"I'm a believer in, 'You can't just take,'" he said. "You have to pour that knowledge into someone—find someone you can mentor." Of his own mentors in life, he acknowledges that he wouldn't be where he is today without them.

"I can make a spreadsheet of over 30 people," Svenkeson said, referring to people who had a positive influence on him. "There are six transformational people who have shaped my life." He notes that his uncle Carl Brown is one, along with his first cousin Antonio Brown Jr., who he credits for steering him away from his "knucklehead" stage and taught him about working hard to benefit others.

His pastor, AZ Jones Jr., served as a father figure to him. "He helped to shape the way I view the world, view my ability to make an impact, and to be a holistic and well-rounded man of God," Svenkeson said. He also credits his success to his strong relationship with his wife and two kids, as well as his physical and emotional health, his finances, and, of course, his firm.

"It's holistic. You can't have just the wealth. It starts with family," he said.

His advice to those who may want to follow in his footsteps: "Don't follow in my footsteps. You have to be wise enough to understand your calling is different. Don't follow anyone. Follow your calling and that will lead you to where you need to go," Svenkeson said.

While Svenkeson has already shown he can handle adversity head on, he approaches every day the same since he co-founded NEOO Partners Inc. "Tomorrow is not promised. Take it one day at a time."

NEOO Partners has two locations: NEOO Midwest at 370 Wabasha Street North, Saint Paul, MN, and NEOO Deep South at 133 Commerce Park Dr., in Jackson, MS. For more information, contact them at 651-237-2033, or visit www.neoopartners.com.

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