

Merchants: Harbor Place will boost business

By Mike LaBella mlabella@eagletribune.com | Posted: Friday, March 6, 2015 12:15 am

HAVERHILL — As the demolition of the Woolworth and nearby buildings continues, downtown business owners said they can't wait for the new Harbor Place development to move in.

Along with a satellite campus for UMass Lowell, the \$70 million development will include new businesses and dozens of new housing units. It is designed to boost the eastern end of downtown just as new development has helped the western end of the inner city in recent years.

Merchants expect that when Harbor Place opens in mid- to late 2016, it will herald the start of a new day for the success of business in the downtown.

For one business owner, it's no surprise that college students and people of all ages like pizza because it's a quick, tasty and affordable meal.

Sylvia Bouraphael, co-owner of Beach Pizza at 181 Merrimack St., said the potential of increased sales from the new development is so great that she anticipates having to hire more help once tenants begin to fill Harbor Place and students begin attending classes there.

"Summer is already busy, but next summer I feel like it's really going to explode," Bouraphael said of sales during the warm weather months.

The first phase of the Harbor Place project is to build a five-story building at the Woolworth site, the eastern gateway to downtown.

That building will have HC Media on the first floor, UMass on the second and third floors, Pentucket Bank on the fourth floor and tenants yet to be chosen for the fifth floor. A plaza and two other public entrance points will provide public access to the river. An adjacent six-story building will include 50 units of workforce housing, 30 units of market-rate housing, and first-floor retail shops and restaurants.

The second phase will expand the project farther down Merrimack Street and is still in the planning stages.



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RYAN HUTTON/Staff photo
LePosh Salon owners Erica Kelleher, left, and Lisa Donnelly are excited about the boost in business they expect from the downtown Harbor Place development.

Bouraphael said she hopes to promote her business to those who work, learn and live at Harbor Place.

"It's going to be good for all the downtown businesses and I think it's going to be a matter of letting them know we're here," she said. "Plus we deliver now, so that's going to be another opportunity for us.

"A lot of students like this type of pizza and will be more of our target going forward," Bouraphael said of her shop's product, which is popular near the seacoast. "We already get students from a local driving school and from the Boys & Girls Club and the YMCA, and on weekend nights we get young couples who are out for the evening."

At the Washington Street end of downtown, Tap restaurant manager Sharon Cohen is looking forward to Harbor Place's new classrooms and the nearby new housing as a source of new customers. She said that from the lunch crowd to the dinner crowd, the future looks bright.

"We have trivia nights and bands, so that should be an appeal," Cohen said. "Maybe there will be some discerning beer drinkers who'd like to come to a brew pub."

The Tap brews nine different kinds of beers that change by the season, Cohen said.

Not only food establishments hope to benefit from Harbor Place.

Lisa Donnelly, co-owner of LePosh Salon & Spa at 42 Washington St., said she's excited about bringing in new clients such as college students and envisions offering them a student discount.

"My business partner Erica Kelleher and I are very supportive of the downtown economy and all downtown businesses, which can't help but get a boost from Harbor Place," Donnelly said. "It's exciting overall for the downtown and local businesses."

City Economic Development Director William Pillsbury said the cornerstone of the city's strategy in the downtown for almost 10 years has been the introduction of people living in the downtown who have disposable income they can spend in restaurants, lounges and other inner-city businesses.

"It goes back to an economic study done years ago that says bringing people downtown with disposable income will create a critical mass that will spur the growth of restaurants and other businesses," Pillsbury said.

"We want to create a viable downtown that serves the whole city, like in the old days when people from throughout the area would travel to do business on Merrimack Street," he said. "The hope is by transforming that area, beginning with Harbor Place, we believe this is what will occur and the transformation of Harbor Place is the catalyst for this to happen."

In addition to UMass Lowell, Harbor Place might also include Northern Essex Community College, resulting in even more students coming to the downtown.

"Northern Essex has always expressed an interest in being downtown," Pillsbury said. "From the city's perspective, we'd love to have their physical presence."

In advance of the construction of Harbor Place, which is expected to begin this spring, workers have been demolishing a string of Merrimack Street buildings that survived the wrecking balls of Urban Renewal in the 1960s and '70s.

This winter, workers demolished a building at 72 Merrimack St. that housed Haverhill Family Eye Care, which relocated to 59 Washington St. They also recently took down the Ocasio Building at 42-54 Merrimack St.

This weekend, the contractor plans to demolish the Newman's Furniture building at 32 Merrimack St. and a building at 22-24 Merrimack St. that housed Emerson Floor Covering. City officials said the work will require temporary closings of the east bound lane of Merrimack Street in that area and at times both lanes.

The demolition of the yellow-brick, art-deco-style Woolworth building, which has been vacant for more than 40 years, is expected to take place early next week.