

New tenants change face of EpiCentre

By Kirsten Valle

kvalle@charlotteobserver.com

Posted: Thursday, Jan. 22, 2009

The EpiCentre was busy at lunchtime one day last week, with uptown workers crowding the restaurants and construction crews hammering and painting in a series of storefronts.

People have been talking about the mixed-use complex for months, but the buzz has mostly surrounded its bars and clubs, such as Whisky River and BlackFinn, which have been drawing thousands on weekend nights.

New tenants have been opening steadily, rare in this tough economy, making the EpiCentre one of the few uptown developments where work is moving forward – and where business appears to be booming.

Now, with a new hotel, more family-friendly restaurants and a number of new retail shops open or in the works at the development at College and Trade streets uptown, the EpiCentre is entering a new phase, developer Afshin Ghazi said last week.

The 16-story, 175-room Aloft hotel opened Jan. 9 and was booked through that weekend, he said. Guests have been drawn to the trendy design – loft-style rooms with tall windows and flat-screen TVs, a colorful lobby with high-backed couches and a pool table – the prices and the fact that it's the first new hotel uptown in years, Ghazi said.

The five-screen EpiCentre Theaters, which includes the restaurant Mez, opened in December.

The project hasn't always been smooth sailing. Construction stalled on a planned luxury condo tower about a year ago, with two floors built, after a pair of lawsuits between Ghazi's company and the condo developer, a subsidiary of Indianapolis-based Flaherty & Collins Properties.

Ghazi declined to comment on the condo tower last week.

New things are happening at the EpiCentre. Construction will start soon on Enso, an Asian bistro, and work should be finished by spring on a covered bar area for the EpiCentre's outdoor concerts and events, Ghazi said.

A sunglass shop, clothing store and art gallery are opening soon, work on the Strike City bowling alley is almost finished, and more restaurants, such as a pizzeria, will open in coming weeks and months, he said.

The EpiCentre has about 50 tenants, and there will be 60 when the project is finished.

Often, people don't realize there's more to the complex than its night life, which “just happened to open first,” Ghazi said.

Work on the EpiCentre began about five years ago, when Ghazi bought the old convention center site from Bank of America and Wachovia. The banks had acquired it from the city as part of the Bobcats arena deal. Ghazi worked out an agreement with the city and county to demolish the convention center and got a \$6.5million pledge from local officials for infrastructure improvements and other work.

The floundering economy makes it a scary time for some new businesses, too, he said. But when asked if that worries him, Ghazi said, “I don't really have a choice.”

Many new concepts have a “honeymoon period” of a year or two, he said. That novelty will carry the EpiCentre's tenants for a while, and when it wears off, Charlotte should be climbing out of the recession, Ghazi said.

The EpiCentre could even help speed the recovery, he said. The hotel, for instance, will boost the area's convention business, and Ghazi expects tourists from up to 150 miles away to make Charlotte and the EpiCentre a weekend destination.

“Charlotte's on the map already,” Ghazi said. “This is just another piece of the puzzle. I think it was a missing piece of the puzzle.”

Kirsten Valle: 704-358-5248