

Friday, February 15, 2008

## The Ghazi Co.'s EpiCentre to expand options in uptown Charlotte

At the center of it all

Charlotte Business Journal - by Bea Quirk Contributing writer



photo NANCY PIERCE

Afshin Ghazi envisions a 24/7 entertainment complex at EpiCentre, which is under construction in the heart of uptown. The mixed-use project includes a raft of dining and entertainment options, including NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s Whiskey River bar, a bowling alley and movie theater.

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The first component of uptown's first mixed-use entertainment complex will see a phased-in launch next month.

For developer Afshin Ghazi, the process to open his \$100 million EpiCentre at the corner of Trade and College streets has seemed like a long road.

"It's taken three years out of my life," says the owner of The Ghazi Co. "It's been like giving birth, and I've been patiently waiting in the delivery room. Every day has been a challenge."

The wait has been even longer for the city. It's been 14 years since the old Charlotte Convention Center closed and its replacement began operating a few blocks south on College Street. The building was on the market until Ghazi purchased the 3.25-acre site in 2004 for \$14.5 million. The 1973 structure was imploded in mid-2005, and construction began soon afterwards.

Ghazi's vision of creating a destination for visitors and residents eager for entertainment will have an ample crowd for its debut as the opening coincides with the arrival of the Atlantic Coast Conference men's basketball tournament March 13-16.

Awaiting sports fans will be Whiskey River, a country music and rock-and-roll bar owned by NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt Jr.

Whiskey River will be a small part of the 267,000-square-foot project. Ghazi says he has between 40 and 50 shops and restaurants signed, making the complex almost fully leased.

Restaurant tenants run the gamut from Smoothie King, Five Guys Burgers, Bruegger's Bagels and The Fudgery to high-end eateries including Cantina Laredo, Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar and Bella Vista Restaurant and Lounge. Also planned are an 18-lane bowling alley and a five-screen, all-digital movie theater.

Atlanta-based **Raving Brands Inc.** will open several of its franchises there, including Flying Biscuit and Shane's Rib Shack.

Bars and clubs will abound. The Rooftop Terrace is a 16,000-square-foot lounge, which will host concerts and private parties. Suite is a Top 40 club. BlackFinn Restaurant & Saloon is an Irish-themed pub. And Howl at the Moon will feature dueling pianos and singalongs.

"There's going to be something for everyone -- from those who just want a slice of pizza to those with expense accounts -- and it'll be open seven days a week, all hours of the day and night," says Bob Durkin, president of Bar Management Group in Charlotte. He worked with Ghazi in leasing the site, and his company will own several venues, including The Rooftop Terrace, Suite and BlackFinn.

Ghazi expects about 90% of the tenants to open by summer, followed by a grand opening event in the fall.

After Whiskey River debuts, the next tenants to open will be Howl at the Moon, The Rooftop Terrace, Cold Stone Creamery and PJ's Coffee and Wine Bar.

The bowling alley, to be called Big City Lanes, will open in early summer and is a creation of Durkin's company. "It's not your typical grab-a-hot-dog-and-beer kind of place -- it's more like a martini bar meets a bowling alley," Ghazi says. It will be an adults-only establishment at night.

Ghazi hopes the movie theater will be ready by late June. It will be operated by Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based Muvico Entertainment, which he calls the "Saks Fifth Avenue of the movie industry." The theater will include a restaurant, lounge and dessert bar. Only adults will be admitted at night.

Ghazi and Durkin pursued a definite strategy in their leasing efforts. "We were looking for concepts that Charlotte has not seen before and concepts that would complement each other," Durkin says. "None are alike, so they will draw different people."

Adds Ghazi, "We initially had to go to potential tenants. But now, as we are coming to an end, they are coming to us." He declines to disclose lease rates.

The entertainment complex will occupy five buildings. It's one of three components that make up the EpiCentre. The 175-room Aloft Hotel is expected to open in the fall, and the 410-unit 210 Trade condo tower is slated for completion a year later.

The hotel and condo tower will rise above the entertainment complex. A four-level, 1,100-space parking garage underneath will serve as the foundation for all the structures.

The garage had a soft opening in December. "We're putting down pavers, and next month, it will look completely different," Ghazi says. All the spaces will be available to uptown visitors until 210 Trade opens when 600 slots will be reserved for residents.

That's good news for the area as it has lost several hundred parking spaces because of construction. "No question about it -- more parking is a great thing," says Tom Sasser, president of Harper's Restaurant Group Inc., which operates four uptown restaurants.

The main entrance to EpiCentre will be along College Street, where valets will be stationed to handle parking. Vehicles can also drop off and pick up visitors there. EpiCentre will have ample street presence with entrances along all four sides. "It's going to be user-friendly and very accessible," Ghazi says.

In addition, there will be bridges connecting the complex to the adjacent light-rail station and to the Overstreet Mall and Omni Hotel. Charlotte Bobcats Arena and the upcoming Ritz Carlton Hotel are nearby.

Ghazi anticipates 10 million visitors will pass through EpiCentre's doors the first year. He's not planning a marketing campaign anytime soon but expects such efforts could include special events and themed celebrations.

Durkin says the tenant roster at EpiCentre will bring more visitors to uptown and they will come more often. "People from Lake Norman will come uptown two or three times month, rather than once, and people from nearby places like Greenville and Winston-Salem will stay for a weekend rather than just a day."

Visit Charlotte Executive Director Mike Butts says his organization has been touting EpiCentre in its marketing materials since it was announced.

"It's going to have a bigger impact than people think. It's going to expand the buzz on Tryon to College and will add to uptown's energy level, creating a critical mass."

Others are a bit more skeptical. "The old story says that if you have more restaurants in an area, more people will come. That's great -- if you do a good job, you'll win. But at some point, the law of diminishing returns kicks in," says restaurateur Sasser.

He's also concerned about uptown's ability to support all the new restaurants if the economy slows significantly.

EpiCentre's retail leasing is not as far along as the restaurant space. Ghazi says he is negotiating for a CVS drug store, a jeweler and women's clothing shop. AT&T is on board for a store, as is Image Salon, Allen Tate Realtors, a dry cleaner and a Bank of America Corp. branch.

## **IN THE UPTOWN MIX**

### **WHAT EPICENTRE IS ADDING TO CENTER CITY**

#### **Entertainment**

- 18-lane bowling alley
- Five-screen, all-digital movie theater

#### **Restaurants**

- Cantina Laredo
- Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar
- Bella Vista Restaurant and Lounge

#### **Nightclubs**

- Suite, a Top 40 club
- Howl at the Moon will feature dueling pianos and singalongs
- Whiskey River, a country music and rock-and-roll bar owned by NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt Jr.

#### **Other dining options:**

- Five Guys Burgers
- Moe's Southwest Grill
- Flying Biscuit

*Bea Quirk is a Charlotte-based free-lance writer who can be reached at [beawrites@aol.com](mailto:beawrites@aol.com).*

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