

Local businesses are keen on new Atrium location

BY CARLA WILSON, TIMES COLONIST JULY 3, 2010



Zambrì's owners Josephine Zambrì, Peter Zambrì, and Calen McNeil at the new location at the Atrium construction site

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist

A new energy is buzzing downtown around Yates, Blanshard and Johnson streets, where the Atrium office building has attracted a set of vibrant local entrepreneurs as ground-floor tenants.

While some stores are moving away from the city centre to Langford or Uptown in Saanich, these business owners are keen to open on the ground floor of the almost-finished Atrium, where 200,000 square feet of Class A office space has been created.

Not only are they counting on luring customers from within the building, but they point to condo projects already built or going up in surrounding blocks. Pedestrians and cyclists are among those expected to stop by the stores where seating will be set up indoors and out.

Jawl Properties is taking special care to choose tenants for its \$100-million Atrium. "We wanted to further enhance the small business culture" in the downtown, said Robert Jawl. "We have been saying no to a lot more people than we have been saying yes to," he said. "We wanted to get it right."

Storefront tenants so far include Zambrì's Restaurant, Habit Coffee and Culture, Pig BBQ Joint, AJ's timescolonist.com/story_print.html?id...

Organic Cafe, Cook Culture, Poppies the Island Florist, which is consolidating into one location, and print shop Metropol.

The 8,000-square-foot atrium inside the complex — for which the building is named — is expected to be a major draw. Two large sculptures by Victoria artist Bill Porteous, who also created the flooring design, will be installed in the atrium, Jawl said. Seven mature olive trees, indoor seating, and room temperature year-round are going in as well. Acoustic engineers and theatrical lighting designers worked on the space, which is expected to attract a wide range of events.

So far 15,000 square feet, the majority of retail space available, has been leased. Tenants are scheduled to move in Sept. 1, with everyone operational by Oct. 1. The Atrium's major office tenant is B.C. Ferries, which has booked 90,000 square feet.

"The ground floor is purposely designed to be a public space first and a lobby for business offices second," said architect Franc D'Ambrosio.

Pedestrians will be able to cut through the building as though it was a mid-block walkway, he said. Yates Street is designed to be the main public entry, with the Blanshard Street entrance used mainly by office workers.

The Atrium will be a catalyst to create a bridge across Blanshard Street and will tie the Harris Green area more strongly to the city's central business district, D'Ambrosio said.

"At night, it is going to be transformative." People attending theatres and clubs will be drawn to the site's restaurants, D'Ambrosio said.

"Visually it is a pretty stunning building ... I think it is going to be such a great community," said Steve Webb, Metropol owner.

Zambri's Restaurant will occupy 3,600 square feet, a larger space than its current location, said Calen McNeil, a company partner. "The layout is going to allow for three times the seating."

The popular restaurant, now in its eleventh year, will be in a sunny location facing Yates Street and have 125 seats including the patio, he said. "It will be a destination. It will be a meeting place."

Pig's Jeff Hetherington said his current 300-square-foot View Street location will be converted into Pig Dog, a hot dog take-out. The new 1,500-square-foot Pig at the Atrium will include his "dream kitchen" plus two meat smokers, an expanded menu and brunch.

He was attracted to the mix of tenants. "Everybody is a young entrepreneur. Everybody is involved in their own business and cares about what they serve," he said.

Retail consultant Jed Grieve is opening Cook Culture with a residential kitchen to be used for demonstrations and cooking classes for small groups. "What I want to do in Victoria is to have cookware and cook paraphernalia that is of good quality and is more affordable for people."

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Habit Coffee's Atrium location is its second in Victoria. Owner Shane Devereaux is planning a large community seating table running through the middle of the room. Bar seating will face Blanshard with windows that open.

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