

## **Downtown plaza takes shape**

*By Ryan Yacco*



*Media Credit: Milos Roganovic/Targum Staff Photographer*

At the heart of New Brunswick lies a work in progress: the Heldrich Plaza building.

The ever-growing skeleton of the future 11-story high-rise is being marketed as a microcosm of the entire downtown redevelopment plan, for its location and planned services.

Planners also see the building as one of several showpiece projects part of the overall redevelopment of the city.

It will sit at the crossroads of Livingston Avenue and New Street, where planners and city officials hope Heldrich Plaza will emerge as a major hub of city activity.

The construction began with a 2003 groundbreaking, and is slated for completion in early 2007.

The structure will encompass the new John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, as well as luxury condominiums, classroom and office space, street level retail space, and a deluxe hotel, spa and conference center, according to its planner, the New Brunswick Development Corporation.

The combination of educational, business and government interests in the complex is seen by project planners as a figurehead for the future of New Brunswick.

The building is named for one of the driving forces behind the reconstruction of New Brunswick, John Heldrich, a former president of Johnson & Johnson.

"It was John Heldrich's vision to locate the center at a university to allow research, policy analysis, service, and education to occur under one roof, encouraging collaboration and synergy," said University President Richard L. McCormick at the time of the groundbreaking.

Originally scheduled for completion in spring of this year, construction was delayed by design changes, as well as complications with financing, officials said.

Now that these issues have been resolved, builders are on track to complete the construction by the new target date of January 2007.

The core of Heldrich Plaza is the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. Currently located at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, the center is a University-based research organization that provides job-related services, such as counseling, training and placement programs.

According to the University, the construction will also give a boost to the local job market.

An estimated 400 construction-related jobs have been created during the building process.

Additionally, in excess of 300 permanent jobs are expected to accompany the opening of the complex. A significant number of these positions will be through the hotel establishment.

Dubbed simply "the Heldrich," the hotel and conference center will be run by Benchmark Hospitality, an independent hospitality management company that operates luxury resorts, hotels and conference centers throughout North America and Japan.

The hotel will offer around 250 deluxe guest rooms, a state-of-the-art health club and spa, indoor swimming pool and ballroom.

The business center, certified by the International Association of Conference Centers, will consist of 21 meeting rooms totaling more than 25,000 square feet in space.

The facilities will feature advanced audio and visual presentation capabilities, as well as high speed wireless Internet access.

The center's first conference has already been booked for 2007.

With a price tag of \$102 million, the project is financed through the investments of state agencies, such as the Redevelopment Authority, Casino Redevelopment Authority and Department of Labor, as well as through private interests, and tax-exempt bonds underwritten by Citigroup.

According to the Devco President Chris Paladino, the building should be topped off as of January 2006 and running under its own power by February. A temporary Certificate of Occupancy for the hotel is planned for Jan. 26, 2007.

Richard Cimilluca, director of Sales and Marketing for the four-star, four-diamond hotel, sees corporate groups as the main consumer base for the facility, though it is also well suited for weddings, banquets and other more sociable events.

The high-tech conference center in particular is expected to draw nationwide meetings of Fortune 500 companies.

To accommodate this trend, the hotel concierge will arrange transportation to and from local airports, as well as offering a shuttle service to the train station and valet

parking for the Morris Avenue parking garage.

"This will be a brand new construction with incredible fit and finish," Cimilluca said. "Benchmark Hospitality is a proven hotel and resort management company. I think the entire community will be very happy with the presence of the Heldrich."

Forty-eight luxury condominiums being built in the complex are currently awaiting approval from the Department of Community Affairs.

Potential buyers are already looking at floor plans, and an underground parking facility for residents is also underway, planners said.

Managed by Trammell Crow Residential, the condos are expected to hit the market within the next month, and sell out well before the building is completed.

All four street level retail locations in the complex are already filled as well, officials said.

Two of the slots will go to returning businesses - The Green Grotto Jamaican restaurant and Boss Tuxedo and Bridal Shop - which were displaced by construction. The remaining two spots will house a florist and a jewelry store.

The displacement drew ire from local businesses, who at the time said the city's reconstruction efforts - and by extension Devco - have neglected to consider their interests in the redevelopment process.

Devco is currently working with staff at the Heldrich Center on the internal components of the structure, such as interior design and furniture schemes.

According to Paladino, "branding" is also a current hot topic for discussion.

"We're trying to decide on names and themes for the restaurant, the bar and the conference room," Paladino said. "It's still wide open right now."