

Rutgers debuts downtown dorm



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RUTGERS — Alvin J. Rockoff, Rutgers College Class of '49, diverted his eyes yesterday from the entrance sign over Rockoff Hall, the new university residence building in downtown New Brunswick dedicated in his name during a ceremony.

"I didn't have a choice," he said of the university and the New Brunswick Development Corporation's decision to honor his service to the community. "But you didn't see me looking up there," he said, gesturing with his head toward the foot-high letters over the doorway that spell his name and that starting Aug. 20 will greet 670 Rutgers juniors, seniors and graduate students to their new home on the corner of George and New streets.

Rockoff surveyed a crowd of 350 people, including his wife Ruth, 18 members of four generations of his family, his ex-classmates, Mayor James Cahill, Devco board Chairman George R. Zoffinger, Rutgers President Richard L. McCormick and current Rutgers students eager to move in.

"We should have charged admission," Rockoff said with a smile.

The 12-story facility, developed by Devco with Pennrose Properties and Hillier Architecture, features 186 fully-furnished apartment suites and street-level retail space that includes 7-Eleven, Cold Stone Creamery, Port City Java and Douglass Pizza & Grille.

Students sharing a bedroom will pay \$590 a month. Single rooms will cost \$700 a month and must be occupied for 12 months.

Praising Rockoff as "a leader whose benevolence and civic duty are legendary," Cahill said, "Rockoff Hall brings the vital presence of Rutgers students into New Brunswick's downtown."

Rockoff delivered a tearful speech touching on his devotion to New Brunswick and Rutgers as evidenced by his charitable activities and work as former chairman of the Rutgers board of governors and the Rutgers board of trustees, and as a member for more than 20 years of Devco's board of directors. Then he and Ruth cut through a red-and-white ribbon with matching silver sheers. And Rockoff Hall was open.

"It smells new," more than one person said while walking into the lobby. "Like a new car."

A flat-screen Panasonic TV and Toshiba DVD player sat against the far wall, surrounded by black leather couches and chairs. A large mural of a rock basin covered the entire north-side wall with quotes from rock songs that feature the word "rock" printed across it. In addition, this maxim: "A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of Rockoff Hall."

"It's really nice," said Biana Volfinzon, a Rutgers junior who will be living at Rockoff. "Is it going to stay this way, or are they going to take this stuff out?"

Last year, Volfinzon lived in a dorm on the Livingston campus, which she said "was like the projects. It was old, there were way too many people using the same bathroom, no air conditioning, and in the winter the heat would be on all the time."

When Rutgers junior and future Rockoff resident Raj Trivedi walked into a ninth-floor suite he will share with three friends, he could hardly contain himself. "Oh my God, this is so tight," he said. "Dude, these bathrooms are huge. And they used real wood."

Trivedi, who lived in the Winkler dorms last year, said that six people would share one bathroom. In the current layout, four of them will share two separate full bathrooms.

He walked on the thick, new tweed carpets, examined the spotless walls, matching wood beds, futon couch, coffee table, bureaus, desks, dining-room table with black plastic chairs, hefty GE air conditioners and views of George Street with a glimpse of the university's New Brunswick campus and the Raritan River. And then Trivedi, wearing a pot-leaf T-shirt, Adidas flip-flops and a Jack Daniels baseball cap, laid down the law.

"Oh, yeah. Everybody is taking off their shoes before coming in here," he said.

But not all new students are thrilled with everything that comes with their new building. Karin Downing, a Rutgers senior and future resident of Rockoff, wrote an online petition signed by almost 100 students complaining about the high price of parking in the new parking deck attached to the building. The New Brunswick Parking Authority owns the deck and charges \$145 a month for parking, far greater than the standard Rutgers parking fee of \$120 a year.

"I can't afford it, and I know a lot of people can't," Downing said.

Julie Strachan, a junior and Rockoff resident, said: "It's kind of unfair. I have to drive my car for work, and I'm studying to be a teacher. I have to go off-campus to observe classes, and I need a car."

Downing, who said she sent a copy of her petition to the Mayor's Office months ago but received no reply, was granted a space on the Cook College campus, which she said requires a bus ride and a 10-minute walk. "I was considered lucky," she said of the spot she received in a lottery of 50 spaces. To get to other spaces offered on Livingston or Busch campuses would require two separate bus rides and a walk.

Karen Kavanagh, Rutgers executive vice president for administrative affairs, said that the rates were set by the Parking Authority, which is out of the university's control. Stressing that the school discourages students from bringing cars with them, she said, "We do provide affordable parking, but it's not that plentiful. If you don't need a car, you shouldn't bring one."

Mitch Karon, executive director of the Parking Authority, blamed the high rates on high construction costs. "The reason the rate is what it is, is because we have an obligation to the bondholders," he said. "The only other suggestion I have (for the students) is that we have other facilities in the city that aren't as high priced."

But it's not just the inconvenience that bothers Downing. "There are a lot of safety issues," she said. "Buses don't run as often after a while, and you'd have to wait out on the street."

Frank Bright, chairman of the New Brunswick Republican Party, also wondered about safety. "We had eight murders in 2003," he said. "What are they doing putting in all these units without addressing the safety issues.?"

Kavanagh said in response: "Public safety will monitor that building 24/7, and we will do everything we can to police that area. Security and safety is everybody's responsibility."

Students living in Rockoff will require an electronic card to gain entrance to the front door and elevators. All entrances to the retail outlets will be from the street. Rutgers police will be headquartered nearby.

But none of these matters bothered Alvin Rockoff yesterday, as he shook hundreds of hands, dabbing sweat from his brow with a handkerchief as the sun hit his newly dedicated public plaza.

One well-wisher sidled up to him and asked, "Alvin, can I use your name when my daughter applies to Rutgers next year?"

Rockoff almost replied, when his friend said, "Oh, she'll get in. But I want her to live here."