

Rutgers' new luxury dorm welcomes its first residents

'THE ROCK' ROLLS OUT THE RED CARPET

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A little after 7 a.m., the first minivans pulled up to the curb, with sleepy college students lugging heavy rubber containers onto the sidewalk as they wiped summer vacation from their eyes.

Around 7:30 a.m., a line began to take shape as the returning students plopped down on the ground amid stacks of books, bedding and bathroom supplies.

And by 8 a.m., the line snaked around the block, buffeted from the street by reading lamps, small-screen televisions, vacuum cleaners and cases of bottled water.

This week marks the beginning of the back-to-school season, with thousands of college students around the state saying goodbye to the beach and hello to another year on campus. Classes at most state schools don't start for another week and a half, but at Rockoff Hall, Rutgers-New Brunswick's brand-new luxury dorm, no one was waiting until the last minute to report.

"The lines are a little crazy, but we were worried about getting the better room," Nicole Podlucky, 20, of Freehold said of her preferred bedroom. Podlucky will share a two-bedroom suite in the new building with three roommates.

"It's more of a chance to party as well," joked one of Podlucky's roommates, Liz Nazaro, 19, of North Brunswick. "We're Douglass girls, so this is our first time in a co-ed dorm."

For most of the students, it was their first time in anything like Alvin Rockoff Hall, a \$55 million downtown tower affectionately dubbed "the Rock."

Tasteful hallway light fixtures replace the dreary fluorescent tubes found in most dorms, and the bathrooms are appointed with stained wood medicine cabinets and full tubs. The 12-story building offers stunning views of the nearby Raritan River, while the first-floor lounge boasts a flat-screen television and black leather couches.

At \$5,800 per academic year, it's Rutgers' most expensive living arrangement, but the cost hasn't deterred students, with every apartment filled and another 200 students on a waiting list.

Neung Kim, 23, of Edison lived in an off-campus apartment last year, but she was enticed back to Rutgers housing this year by Rockoff.

"I didn't like the dorms. You had to share a communal bathroom, they were very old, the next building was miles away," Kim said. "But this is new, and I liked how it was right in the center of New Brunswick."

Rockoff Hall is a unique partnership between Rutgers and the New Brunswick Development Corp., known as Devco. The local nonprofit organization constructed the building and will retain ownership during a 30-year agreement with the university. Devco also will maintain Rockoff, though Rutgers police provide security and student "apartment advisers" are assigned to every floor.

The heavy university presence and the ubiquitous dorm furniture leave no doubt that Rockoff is very much a dormitory, but its stylish accents and location in the heart of downtown give students itching for a place of their own a taste of off-campus living.

"This is so much better ... There's no comparison," said Tahlia Hein, a 19-year-old English major from Marlton who spent her past two years in the dorms. "I don't feel like I'm in a ward."

Parents yesterday were equally impressed as they helped their sons and daughters cart a semester's worth of supplies and provisions upstairs.

"All the kids wanted to get apartments and get out of the dorms, but as parents we were concerned with their safety and not having all the necessary amenities," said Hein's mother, Denise Kramarz. "This is a wonderful compromise."

There were, naturally, a smattering of complaints. Some students said the apartments were smaller than they expected, while others wondered why the common areas had yet to be furnished. The biggest gripe was the cost of a new parking deck next to the dorm, which will run students \$145 a month. Several said they would be leaving their cars on campus to save money, and a petition is circulating online urging the New Brunswick Parking Authority to lower the rates.

It also was obvious yesterday that Rockoff is not finished. Shops ranging from 7-Eleven to local favorite Douglass Pizza are slated to occupy the building's ground level, but the only evidence of their existence yesterday were paper "Coming Soon" signs taped to the front windows.

A fitness center is still several months away, and the laundry facilities are not ready either, though Devco President Chris Paladino said the washers and dryers should be on line by Tuesday.

Still, Paladino said the turnout yesterday, the first move-in day, was overwhelming, with more than half the building's 670 students checking in. The extra time gives the Devco staff a chance to work out all the kinks before professors start piling on the work.

"We're making sure all the toilets flush, all the drains drain, all the refrigerators freeze, and if they don't, we'll fix them," Paladino said. "This is sort of a dry run."

Most students, though, said they'd live with a few glitches in exchange for the thrill of living in a brand-new building. Samantha Davis, an apartment adviser on the sixth floor, said she was "floored" by the building and can't wait to get settled in at the Rock.

"Years from now, I'll drive by and say 'I was the first to live there.'"