

The Old Port - NEW TENANTS ARE READY TO DO BUSINESS

By Peter Harrington

It was less than 6 months ago when the local doomsayers were foretelling the end of the Old Port. True, at the end of 2009, there were reasons for concern. Many longstanding retailers turned in their keys to let someone else have the opportunity to sell their wares, many of them along Exchange Street. Also contributing to the gloom at year end was that for the first time in many years, there had been vacancies through the summer of 2009 on Lower Exchange Street. A rough estimate indicates that there were 13 spaces that became available. The good news is that 11 have recently been leased. That's 3 spaces per month in the middle of the winter folks, not bad, not bad at all. It appears that the Old Port once again, is leading the City of Portland out of the doldrums and into the promise of a bright future.

The retail focus has morphed from nick knock stores, to high end specialty home goods, artisan gifts and accessories, and a large influx of restaurants. Expansion is on-going as well. Mexicali Blues has leased the former Mr. Bagel space on Moulton Street directly across the street from their existing location. Matt Barney of MCB reports that the move was "a perfect fit for both landlord and tenant. Mexicali Blues was able to fill their need for expansion close to the heart of the Old Port and the landlord secured a stable, long-standing retail tenant with very little downtime."

I'm also optimistic regarding further activity throughout the summer of 2010. Rental rates have softened somewhat but not excessively so. The Old Port is coming back strong. New retailers include international yoga and workout gear store "lululemon" at 24 Milk, "DeLise Décor" (home furnishings) at 322 Fore, "Lisa-Marie's Made In Maine" (gift shop featuring products by Maine artisans) at 35 Exchange, "Lovely Things" (new and antique jewelry and accessories) at 332 Fore, "Mt. Desert Island Ice Cream" (ice cream, sorbets, frozen novelties) at 51 Exchange, "Nicola's Homes" (home furnishings and design center) at 215 Commercial. Restaurants include "Sonny's" on Upper Exchange next to Tommy's Park, "Pat's Pizza" at 30 Market, an expanded "Market Street Eats" at 36 Market, "Havanna South" on Wharf Street, "Linda Bean's Maine Lobster Rolls" at 39 Exchange, "Shima" at 339 Fore and an expanded "Walter's" at 2 Portland Square. These new retailers and restaurants are helping to change the face of the Old Port and point to the district's bright future.

It is true that not all areas within Southern Maine are experiencing the same pace of reabsorption of space. Too much retail space was created and it will likely take years for the excess space to be absorbed. The Old Port however, offers a shopping experience unique to the area. It's nestled in the heart of a beautiful city, at the gateway to Portland Harbor and all it offers. The combination of its historical setting and the City's commitment to maintain its character bodes well for the future.