



## Former News building opens as apartments, tavern

By Tom Dalton  
Staff writer

SALEM — It's not often that a restaurant opening becomes an event, but Tavern in the Square seems to have had that effect in Salem .

Just hours after opening late Thursday afternoon, the 300-capacity restaurant was packed, and it stayed that way through most of the weekend as word spread at Internet speed on social networking sites.

"It was all over Facebook and Twitter," said Kate Fox, executive director of Destination Salem, the city's tourism office.

Located at a busy intersection, Tavern in the Square has been drawing stares from passing motorists not used to seeing a restaurant in the downtown with retractable windows. Just like that, it seems, the corner of Washington and New Derby streets had been transformed from an empty former newspaper plant, an eyesore, to a row of open-air windows filled with customers.

"This is exactly what we hoped for on this corner — vibrant, alive," Mayor Kim Driscoll said yesterday at the ribbon-cutting of Washington at Derby, the residential and retail development at the site of the former Salem Evening News plant. There are 24 apartments on the top three stories, and Tavern in the Square on the ground floor.

"I do believe Salem will be to the North Shore what the North End is to Boston," state Rep. John Keenan said.

Even the restaurant seemed impressed by its reception. The first few days in Salem were busier than the openings of its two other Taverns in the Square in Cambridge, one of the owners said.

"This one topped them all," Mark Morris said. "It was a nice, controlled chaos."

Not all, however, has gone perfectly for RCG, the Somerville developer that did this project and recruited Tavern in the Square. It tried a few years ago to develop this entire block with housing, retail and underground parking, but abandoned those grandiose plans for this more modest proposal.

It had hoped to sell the Washington at Derby residences as condominiums, but that was before the stock market collapse. Now, it's all apartments, with rents from \$1,500 to \$2,500 a month.

City leaders yesterday praised RCG for sticking with this project and persevering through a tough economy.

On the market for two months, more than half of the apartments have been rented, RCG said. In addition, it has already filled the seven apartments in Central House, the first stage of this project, an adjoining building at the corner of Front and Washington streets.

"Even in a down economy, there are people who want to live in the downtown," said Alex Steinbergh, a principal of RCG. "In our view, Salem has been outperforming most of the local cities in this recession."

Three weeks ago, a Boston developer broke ground on another major downtown project, the Salem Jail redevelopment.

Yesterday's ribbon-cutting included tours of the new apartments, some of which have granite kitchen countertops and shower stalls. Although the event drew mostly city officials and business leaders, there were a few curious members of the public.

"I think it's wonderful, I really do," said Shirley Walker, one of the leaders of the Downtown Neighborhood Association. Her group has raised concerns about a number of issues, including the noise from downtown restaurants and bars.

Walker, who lives in an RCG building at Derby Lofts, said she is confident the developer will deal with any problems that arise with Washington at Derby.

"They have had control of this from the get-go," she said. "That makes a huge difference."

The restaurant said it installed sound-proofing on the ceiling of Tavern in the Square to block the noise from the rest of the building.

Now that Washington at Derby has been completed, RCG is contemplating its next move, but keeping its plans to itself.

"I hope we have some things we can talk about in September," Steinbergh said.