

Theater at old shipyard plans on summer start

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By Johanna Seltz, Globe Correspondent | April 5, 2009

HINGHAM - David Scott can't wait to show "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince" in his new Patriot Cinemas at the Hingham Shipyard when it comes out this July.

At least, he hopes he won't have to wait any longer to open the six-screen theater, which has been in the works for eight years - about the time it took for the Harry Potter franchise to trot out its first five movies.

"I'm thrilled that it's finally happening," said Scott, treasurer of the family-owned business. "We got our building permit [last week], we've started to fit out our space, and we're building a movie theater. We've got just under 1,000 seats, stereo surround-sound, stadium seating. . . . It's going to be beautiful."

Beautiful wasn't the first word that came to mind when describing the shipyard site in the past.

While the waterfront bustled with as many as 26,000 workers building ships for the Navy at record-setting pace during World War II, activity on the 130-acre site on the Weymouth-Hingham line quickly declined when the war ended. For decades, all that was there were a few low-rent businesses, dilapidated warehouses, and parking for the commuter boat.

In 1996, a local company bought the site and unveiled plans for a massive residential, commercial, and retail development. Thirteen years later, the old buildings are gone, new ones have gone up, and work continues with a consortium of developers on a 1.2-million-square-foot plan.

People are living in apartments where the old General Services Administration building - a steel behemoth that was a third of a mile long - once stood. Michael Roberts, vice president of development for AvalonBay, said construction is almost complete on the 235 apartments and about 70 percent are leased.

"It's going relatively well," he said, adding that the recession has slowed things since many prospective tenants are having trouble selling their homes. However, there's a waiting list for the 23 affordable units - which rent for less than \$1,000 a month versus the market rate of \$1,600 to more than \$2,000, he said.

Condominiums and 150 townhouses also are planned.

About 85 percent of the work is done on the 210,000 square feet of commercial space at the other end of the shipyard, now named the Launch, according to Leslie Cohen, vice president of development for Samuels & Associates.

About 55 percent of the space is rented, and another 25 percent will be by the summer, when the roads, parking lots, and public space will be complete, she said. Another 30,000 square feet of office space is planned.

The businesses include Old Navy, Bodyscapes Fitness, the Fresh Market grocery, Bed Bath and Beyond, and several restaurants. Esti Parsons, a partner of Radius in Boston, plans to open a French bistro named Esti's, and Paul Wahlberg of Bridgeman's in Hull (and brother of actors Donnie and Mark) is opening a Mediterranean restaurant named Alma Nove, after his mother.

The developers wanted a movie theater and turned to Patriot Cinemas, which owns the Loring Hall Cinema in Hingham Square, as well as theaters in Hanover, Scituate, South Weymouth, Portland, Maine, and Rumford, R.I.

"If a movie theater is going in the shipyard, we want to run it," Patriot Cinemas' Scott said. "This will protect the Loring and give us much more flexibility to try new things there, like ballet and opera and concerts in high definition."

Hingham officials worried that movies at the shipyard would attract too much traffic for nearby Route 3A to handle, and too many teenagers. The Zoning Board of Appeals approved the theater, but wrote specific conditions on the types of

films it could show: "The movies . . . shall be primarily of a character generally considered art or high-end commercial films, or family films, whose primary audience would typically not include teenagers."

The board also required the theater to offer monthly "movies for mommies" and, twice a month, make space available to a nonprofit organization.

Scott said he's happy to make room for nonprofits and mothers with children. He didn't want to discuss the conditions for the types of films, but said he didn't expect any problems. The condition would be enforced by the town building inspector.

"We'd love to open with "Harry Potter" or the new "Ice Age" movie," Scott said.

Industry figures show movie box office revenue is up almost 12 percent this year compared with 2008, and Scott said his theaters have been busy.

"If there's a good movie, people will go see it," he said. "It's still a cheap form of entertainment."

He said he doesn't know yet how much tickets will cost at the new theater - although the Zoning Board's permit outlaws the "discount concept."

"We just want a nice comfortable atmosphere to watch a movie," Scott said. "And popcorn. It's all about the popcorn."