



In focus

Small to mid-sized businesses discuss their vision for the year
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JOANN WITELLI

Sandwich shop rolls out 'Express'

By Lisa R. Schoolcraft
STAFF WRITER

Mike Lassiter is thinking small for his sandwich business.

Lassiter, president of Rising Roll Franchising Co. LLC, is rolling out an "express" version of his Rising Roll Gourmet sandwich shops, with plans to put them in office buildings, universities, airports and hospitals.

Rising Roll Gourmet Express, which opened its first location in early 2009 at

Grab and go: Rising Roll Gourmet Express will soon be located in office buildings, universities, airports and hospitals.

Powers Pointe, 5665 New Northside Drive, in Atlanta, plans to open its second location at Monarch Tower in Buckhead by the end of January, depending on permitting.

"This is just a scaled-down version of our product line," Lassiter said. "We had always had this concept in our long-term plan for Rising Roll."

Rising Roll Gourmet began in Atlanta in 1996 as Uptown Gourmet Sandwich Co.

The idea to create an express version of the original store got on the fast track after an office management company approached Lassiter, having seen Rising Roll do a "grab and go" concept, and asked to put it in other office buildings.

"We knew we had to move up that concept and that's when we started working on the model and created the express unit," he said. "Now we're going into one of the premiere class A office buildings in the market."

At Monarch Tower, Rising Roll will take over a former sandwich shop location.

Thad Ellis, senior vice president at Atlanta-based Cousins Properties Inc. (NYSE: CUZ), said Rising Roll is filling a vital need for class A office buildings attempting to maintain tenants and amenities. Cousins owns several class A offices in metro Atlanta including Terminus 100 and One Ninety One Peachtree Tower.

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"Can an office be class A without food? You can, but the building would be at a competitive disadvantage," Ellis said.

That's why Ellis and other landlord representatives like him are recruiting upper-end food operators "particularly in the nicer buildings. Even in hard economic times, we're much more focused on it as an

amenity for our tenant base," Ellis added.

Having a food operator is an equal amenity to a health club or security in class A buildings, he said.

"The other thing that has changed in the past five to 10 years is people drink coffee later into the day," Ellis said. "Many people work at their desks. They really do expect

[food service in the building.]"

Food operators are even more important in suburban office buildings that often stand alone, said Matt Bronfman, managing director and chief operations officer of Jamestown, owner of 999 Peachtree Street and Northside IBM office buildings at 4111 Northside Parkway.

"In a place like Midtown, there are a plethora of restaurants that are around office buildings," he said. "In some areas, it's too difficult to cross the street, so it's important to have good food in the building, or a restaurant in the building."

Bronfman doesn't believe an office can be class A without a food element.

"In more urban markets, like New York, that might not be as important," he said, "but in a market like Atlanta it is pretty darn important."

On a roll

Gregg Katz, tenant representative with The Shopping Center Group LLC, has been working with Lassiter to find locations for Rising Roll Gourmet Express.

"It's an exciting opportunity for them, and for a lot of the major office developers as well," Katz said.

With office vacancy up, existing buildings and new construction are having to compete hard for tenants, he said.

Office landlords used to rely on the small mom-and-pop food operators, but now landlords are looking for something different, Katz said.

"They want consistent quality," he said. "With some of the mom-and-pop operations, you can't always count on that. And some [landlords] want breakfast operations as well."

Several other food concepts also cater to office buildings, he said. "One of the first concepts to perfect this was Subway."

Rising Roll Gourmet Express will have a symbiotic relationship with its six retail stores in metro Atlanta, Lassiter said.

"We can't go into every office building," Lassiter said.

The express locations won't be so close to the retail stores to cannibalize them, but must rely on them for the food, since the express units have no kitchen, he said.

Food is delivered first thing in the morning to the express units, where there are refrigerated deli counters, he said.

One retail store could support one or more express units depending on the trade area.

"We're doing our first express in Buckhead," Lassiter said, "and we still have room in Buckhead to do a retail location."

The express concept is also a way to "fill in areas where we're not going to put a retail store, but we want to embrace," Lassiter said. "I can see us doing a retail store downtown and two express units, because we've identified three areas of downtown."

Lassiter expects to open three more Rising Roll Gourmet stores in metro Atlanta in 2010 "but we'll do more express units [this year] than retail locations."

He's also talking to a building owner in Midtown for an express location and expects to have a temporary express location at AmericasMart Atlanta in March for the apparel tradeshow.

"And we have been approached by some other office management companies," and a hospital for the concept, he said.

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Needed dough: Rising Roll locations could fill a vital need for class A office buildings attempting to maintain tenants and amenities.



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