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Hydro, pizza lift retail hope

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A couple of thousand Manitoba Hydro staffers and a new pizza eatery are on a menu of downtown goodies expected to take a bite out of Winnipeg's central retail doldrums.

Though only a handful of storefronts are occupied on the cityplace mall's upper level, senior management and retailers at the downtown complex are optimistic about traffic that the nearby Hydro tower will bring.

The mall's upper floor has seen a gradual decrease in occupancy to only three general retailers in addition to a food court and a few other commercial businesses amid a total vacancy of about 10% to 12%.

However, after the 22-storey Hydro building opened only weeks ago to some of its employees, the mall's managers say a Ricki's store has seen its number of visitors rise by about 44% in the past week alone.

"Some of our retailers have noticed big increases due to the Manitoba Hydro (headquarters)," said Craig Stoddart, general manager with mall management firm Redcliff Realty. "It will make a huge difference."

Shauna Boychuk, manager of the women's apparel shop, said the rise in foot traffic is "definitely due to Hydro" and its gradual movement of staff to the area.

Despite the MTS Centre's apparent failure to generate sufficient spending at the mall to keep the upper level thriving, a Boston Pizza outlet's official opening Thursday at the other end of the complex has raised optimism.

Tracey Lachaine, Redcliff's marketing manager for cityplace, said she's "really excited" about the big brand filling the approximately 6,500-square-foot space that was occupied until recently by Pasta La Vista restaurant.

"It's just their approach to everything," Lachaine said of Boston Pizza. "Their marketing and the fact that they're so aggressive in that respect will be really good."

Boston Pizza has delivered about 100 employees to the mall, and has found no shortage of hungry customers -- especially before and after Manitoba Moose games at the arena adjoining the complex.

"It's a great space to be in, tied in of course with MTS Centre," said Carlos Ferreira, operations manager for BP's Winnipeg restaurants.

"There's a lot of residential downtown, too. And takeout and delivery is a big part of our business."

Stoddart said many Hydro employees -- nearly 100 so far -- are also occupying monthly parking stalls at cityplace lots and generating more traffic to the mall.