

Mall aims upscale with 'Collection'

By JOHN C. DRAKE

The word "collection" has cachet. That's what the marketing gurus who renamed the expanded Natick Mall are betting on. General Growth Properties Inc., which last week renamed the mall Natick Collection, is picking up on a mall-naming tactic that's been used by other shopping centers wanting to make the transition to high-end, mixed-use retail destination, a marketing expert said. Natick Collection won't be the only mall with the "Collection" moniker. Tim Ross, a principal with Seattle-based Kendall Ross Brand Development and Design, recently helped rebrand a group of malls in northwest Washington as Bellevue Collection. Somerset Collection, a mall in Troy, Mich., is another example.

"We see it coming back a lot more in the last couple of years," said Ross, whose firm helps companies market themselves at times of growth and transition. "The idea of 'collection' conveys a certain level of luxury or a certain level of premium. At the same time, it is sophisticated and also says there are multiple things you can get or do within the area."

The new name seems destined to take some getting used to. "It's very different," said Joan M. Craig, community relations coordinator for Natick's Morse Institute Library. "Quite often in doing marketing and publicity in my job, I have to remember that if you have to explain it, perhaps you should change it." Craig said there were plenty of other options that would probably roll off shoppers' tongues more easily. "Just off the top of my head, Natick Place, or the Villages at Natick or something could have explained a lot more about what they were trying to say," she said.

Stephanie Gambino, senior marketing manager for the mall, said the new name is designed to highlight the expanded mall as a collection of fine retailers and restaurants. "We're creating, literally, an unparalleled shopping and dining experience here," Gambino said. The 500,000-square-foot expansion will include a Neiman Marcus, the state's first Nordstrom, and 100 other high-end stores and restaurants. It is set to be complete in September. Adjacent to the shopping center will be a 115-unit condominium complex, called Nouvelle at Natick. The Natick Collection name, announced Tuesday, is the mall's second

attempt at developing a new identity. It had settled on a plan to chop off the word "Mall" and call the complex "Natick," an appropriation of the town's identity that did not sit well with many local leaders. "There was cries coming from every corner of the town that this isn't right," said Arthur B. Fair III, president of the Natick Center Associates and owner of a downtown insurance agency. "We're obviously appreciative of their action on it."

While the move may have soothed relations with town leaders, all the name changes could lead to confusion for consumers. "It signals to potential customers and current customers that there's confusion," Ross said, "that the center or mall may not be quite sure of what it's doing. And that creates an uneasiness about 'Should I go there if they don't even have a sense of what they're doing?' You can't just change names and hope people adopt it."

Kara Smith, manager of the Caché women's apparel store in the mall, said the frequent name changes may be "a little confusing" for shoppers, but she doubts that would stop people from coming. "With all the new stores coming in, it's really going to help us," she said. "All the new stores are definitely going to help bring business in. We're excited." Besides, she said, "People will continue to call it the Natick Mall, regardless." While Craig is not a fan of the choice, she did have one good thing to say. "On a positive note, working for a library, I like the idea of a collection," she said. "So, kudos to them with regards to using library terminology."