

Microsoft workers get their very own mall

April 23 2009, By Sharon Pian Chan

Microsoft workers should never have to leave campus again to buy a beer, replace a bike tire or heal their spiritual energy through Reiki.

This week, the company opened a splashy dining-shopping destination called The Commons, a signature piece in a massive expansion that is adding the equivalent of a Columbia Tower to what the company calls the world's largest corporate [campus](#).

The complex of 14 restaurants, shops, soccer field, even a pub is the gooey filling in the emerging West Campus, a 1.4 million-square-foot town square of four office buildings that will house the company's Entertainment and Devices division, which developed video-game player Xbox and music-player Zune.

While the head of Microsoft's business remains on the other side of Highway 520 -- the Windows and Office groups, CEO Steve Ballmer's office -- its stomach is clearly moving west.

"We've got a daytime population of over 50,000 people, so when you're looking at that size of congregation of people, you start thinking about the things they need in their daily lives," said Chris Owens, general manager of worldwide real estate at Microsoft.

"The Commons ... has a lot of features to help people get things done, whether that's banking or eating or shopping or taking care of their cellphone connectivity, getting exercise, connecting with people socially, without having to get off campus."

The Mixer, a two-story building, includes a spinoff of Pike Place Market, complete with a miniature version of the red neon clock, hunks of Beecher's cheese, jars of pepper jelly and Chukar cherries.

The 106,000-square-foot building also houses a post office, a credit union, a bicycle-repair shop and cellphone dealers. Upstairs, a conference center can hold 1,000 people for a meeting.

Across a patio area surrounding a fountain is the Submixer building, which holds a spa where employees can get a trim or a facial, buy scented candles at a Watson Kennedy store and browse an art gallery featuring art produced by employees.

The Spitfire pub, after some haggling, will open up for business shortly, but will serve alcohol only after 3 p.m. by group reservation. Only employees can use the Commons' buildings.

"It's really nice. It has a futuristic vibe," said Hrvoje Benko, a researcher on interactive touch technology at Microsoft Research. "It's a little mall like."

Benko, who was eating a free ice cream on a "soft" opening day last week, said he could see coming down to buy lunch a few days a week. He was most excited about having his own soccer field because the fields on main campus are often booked.

The main campus also has food courts and sports fields, but the offices grew piecemeal. The West Campus, which has a capacity for 4,500 workers, represents a new approach for Redmond, Owens said: a master-planned office and recreation complex.

Studio D, a four-story West Campus office building that filled up in March, features a glittery beaded curtain with the images of Capt. Kirk

and Spock_William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, not J.J. Abrams' millennial version_creating the effect that Star Trek Enterprise officers are transporting into the lobby.

For now, workers on the east side of 520 can head west by crossing an overpass or taking a Microsoft shuttle. The company is planning to build a bridge over the freeway. Those plans continue even after [Microsoft](#) announced 5,000 job cuts and scrapped some real-estate expansion plans in January. Owens said the cuts did not affect West Campus plans.

"We made a decision to do this years ago," he said. "It's serving such a large population, it's not that much of a set of frills to the campus. It's going to be serving 10,000 to 15,000 people a week."

He did say the company held down costs by choosing less expensive fixtures and finishes in the new buildings: "We haven't gold plated anything in that facility."

He said they were also keeping the opening celebrations subdued in a down economy. "We're not going to be having Bruce Springsteen come and play or anything like that."

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