

SOUP'S ON FOR GOVERNMENT CENTER

Mich. chain Zoup set to open first Hub outlet

By **DONNA GOODISON**

Zoup! Fresh Soup Co. is hoping for a bite — or perhaps a sip — of the Government Center lunch and after-work crowd.

The Southfield, Mich.-based chain, which operates 25 locations in six states, will open its first Zoup in Massachusetts at 3 Center Plaza this fall.

Zoup serves 12 hot and cold soups from a menu of more than 100 that rotates daily, and each order is served with a hunk of fresh bread. At the Glastonbury, Conn., store yesterday, the soups ranged

from lobster bisque, French onion and old-fashioned chicken noodle to shrimp and crawfish etouffee, ginger butternut squash and gazpacho. Prices range from \$3.75 for 8 oz. to \$6.95 for a 16-oz. bowl. The menu also includes made-to-order salads and sandwiches.

Customers can sign up for a daily e-mail with the list of soups, order online and pick up their meals at a pickup-only register. The Web site also lists whether soups are low-fat, vegetarian, spicy or dairy- and gluten-free.

The time is right for

fast-casual chains, which have benefited from recession-wary consumers who have “traded down” from full-service restaurants to save money, according to Technomic Inc., a Chicago food and restaurant consulting firm.

Zoup, though, competes against the likes of the much larger Boston-based Au Bon Pain and Panera Bread, the category leader which last year generated almost \$2.8 billion in sales from 1,304 stores.

“We just want the right to be on people’s short list,” Zoup managing partner Eric Ersher said.

The 2,200-square-foot Boston restaurant, which will seat about 40 customers, will be operated by franchisees George and Debbie Keefe of North Easton, who are shooting for a mid-November opening.

The 12-year-old Zoup is privately owned, and all but six of its restaurants are franchises.

“We do some area development deals but, for the most part, they’re single-store owners,” Ersher said. “We’ve been very deliberate about our growth and site selection.”

— dgoodison@bostonherald.com



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HOT ITEM: Zoup managing partner Eric Ersher says he wants to be on the ‘short list’ for Hub diners seeking a casual restaurant that sells freshly-made soups.