



Serving Cape Ann

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Applying ATM technology to dry-cleaning Gloucester's Nor'east to offer 'autogam' service

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GLoucester — It will look and perform much like an ATM and drive-through bank branch, which, indeed, was what the 1,600-square-foot commercial unit at Station Place was designed to accommodate.

But instead of transactions in cash and checks, customers will give and receive shirts and slacks and the rest of today's wardrobe by traditional and other means.

Customers will be able to conduct their business with the uniformed Nor'east Cleaners crew at the drive-through window on the Washington Street side of the three-story structure now becoming the centerpiece of the commuter rail improvement project. Customers will also be able to park on the Shaw's side, enter Station Place and do their dry-cleaning business with humans across a counter, just as they do at an old-fashioned dry cleaner.

But if they wish — during normal business hours and before and after them — customers also will be able to do their business with machines, the dry-cleaning equivalent of ATMs.

These computer terminals respond to keypad instructions — to accept and process dry-cleaning items and bring finished work to the customer via a conveyor-belted storage system. Pin numbers and credit cards provide the necessary security as they do with ATMs.

These terminals don't have an official name and haven't been around long enough or in enough places — there are only 25 in the United States — to have added a new word to the colloquial vocabulary. But it's a good bet they'll be called "autogams."

"Autogam" is a contraction for "automated garment access machine," the emerging term for the computer-controlled stainless steel conveyor belt system. Using a keypad to operate the autogam, the machine has a door that opens to allow customers to place their dry-cleaning inside or pick up clothing.

Beyond ATM-like convenience, autogams have added a spark of "gee-whiz" errand-time entertainment to the dull chore of dropping off or fetching dry-cleaning, according to Frank Dubasic, director of U.S. operations for Metalprogetti, the privately held Italian company that introduced the autogam technology to Europe in the 1980s and

now is showing their stuff to dry cleaners in this country.

In western states where most autogams are found — Nor'east's will be New England's third — Dubasic insists kids are begging their parents to join them on the trek to the unattended kiosk to watch the machines deliver the hangers by seemingly robotic action — or magic.

"People love it," says Dubasic. "It's like Disneyland to the kids."

At \$60,000, the autogam system is much more than a mesmerizing gimmick for David Mering, who acquired Nor'east in the late 1980s and has modernized the business.

His introduction six years ago of home pickup and delivery service now accounts for up to 30 percent of his volume, topping 400,000 items a year. His \$100,000 investment in two giant washers large enough for an entire little league of uniforms allowed his plant to keep pace.

But the quantity of work was pressing capacity at the cleaners' Bass Avenue location. Expansion somewhere would alleviate the crush at the counter and free up storage space for growth. These factors were on Mering's mind when Station Place became a possible solution. Developer

Todd Twombly suggested adding a drive-through branch cleaners at the station.

"Todd is a customer," said Mering. "They wanted a bank. They only thought of us because the banks fell through."

Mering said he sees the Station Place branch as a relief valve for overcrowding. "We don't expect a large volume of new customers," he said. "There's only so much dry cleaning to be done on Cape Ann."

Now, customers will have the option of dropping off clothes at Bass Avenue and picking them up at Station Place, without leaving their cars. "It's a perfect fit," Mering said.

Twombly feels the same way about Nor'east's commitment to Station Place.

With space for a queue of at least 14 cars for the drive-through cleaning business, Twombly said, it would be unlikely that the line would clog traffic on Railroad Avenue. And ample parking on the Station Place site would give customers the option of parking and dealing with Mering's staff at the counter inside, or the ever-ready autogam system. And next to Nor'east and the Subway that has also signed a lease at Station Place, there still is room for an old-fangled ATM.