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Goodbye to Zellers/Towers

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The Zellers Select store on the Sunset Strip will close its doors for the last time Saturday at 6 p.m. after 35 years in business.

The store was called Towers when it opened in June 1968 – the first “big-box” store to set up shop in or near the city. Towers and adjoining grocery store Food City – now IGA – opened up the strip to the Grey County Mall, McDonald’s, Burger King, Canadian Tire and numerous automobile dealerships. Zellers took over the Towers chain in 1991.

“We have some long-time customers that are going to miss us and we’re going to miss them, of course,” said store manager Debbie Brennan. “It’s going to be tough not seeing the staff all the time or the customers. I’ve got staff and customers who have been here since Day 1.”

After the announcement Aug. 25 that the store would close, many employees were offered positions at the Zellers store at the Heritage Place mall across town. The task of closing the west-side store has fallen to Brennan, store supervisor Merv Vokes, nine regular employees and six temporary employees.

The Zellers logo is written in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The letters are slanted to the right, giving it a dynamic and modern appearance. The 'Z' is particularly large and stylized, with a thick stroke.

Brennan will stay on after Saturday to make sure the store is empty before her tenure with Zellers ends after 16 years. She's been at the Sunset Strip store for 12 years.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she said when asked about her future. "I honestly don't know at this point what I'm doing."

Vokes has worked at the store since 1973 and plans to devote more time to his own water-cooler and bottled water business. He said he'll miss the friendly clientele who became much more than customers.

"People come in and you're not even sure of their names, but you talk to them," he said. "It's like family, in a sense."

Towers employed about 120 people when it was taken over by Zellers. The store's name was later changed to Best Value and then to Zellers Select.

The two longest-serving employees are Doris Patton and Marion Walsh, both of whom were on hand when Towers and Food City first opened on June 11, 1968.

Patton said so many people were there, the lineup outside the doors stretched past the eastern end of the building. A report by The Sun Times estimated the crowd at about 1,500 people.

“They were just cracking to get in,” Patton said.

Many long-time employees feel the store lost a lot of its charm when the layout was substantially altered to eliminate the complex’s court and to end the direct access between the department store and the grocery store.



The closing of the restaurant about five years ago was another blow. The pharmacy closed several weeks ago.

“There’s no pharmacy on this side (of town) now,” said Patton, who will retire a year ahead of schedule. “A lot of elderly people liked this store because it wasn’t a great big maze to have to walk through.”

“There’s a real need in this area for a store like this,” said Walsh, who plans to look for a part-time job and volunteer at the hospital. “We were not losing money but from the time the restaurant went, things never were quite the same.

“It’s a loss. It’s been a big part of my life . . . my youngest daughter was only 18 months old when I started here and now she’s in her 30s with three young children.”

A company spokesperson could not comment Monday when asked why the store was closing.

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NOTE: The former Zellers/Towers space has remained empty ever since it closed and now Owen Sound is also slated to lose its remaining Zellers store at Heritage Place.

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