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By Henry Bury  
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Downtown Belleville has lost an outdoor sports specialty store but gained a clothing retail operation.

Gina and Arnold Sikkema closed the doors to their eight-year-old Highlands Outfitters store at 279 Front St. Thursday afternoon so they can start enjoying retirement together. The Belleville couple had been doing business downtown for just over a year, selling everything from canoes to camping gear.

But while one store leaves the village of downtown Belleville, another has stepped in to fill the void.

Melanie Yorke, 37, and her 42-year-old sister, Melissa, have opened up "etc" right in the heart of downtown.

The 1,050-square-foot store is



Gina and Arnold Sikkema have decided to close their eight-year-old Highlands Outfitters business so they can enjoy retirement together. Their downtown store closed for good Thursday.

located just inside the main entrance of Century Place and sells "affordable" ladies, men's and children's clothing.

The sisters both have full-time jobs of their own — Melanie manages Kente Property Management in Century Place while Melissa is currently on cancer leave from her supervisory duties at Hastings Manor — but they still decided to open a new business.

In August, they sold Tickets Plus on Front Street, a lottery and smoke shop they owned and operated for the past two years, and opened etc in mid-September.

Why a clothing store?

"There are very few clothing stores downtown that offer affordable clothing like we are providing," said Melanie Yorke. "We carry everything from pajamas, office wear, outerwear and undergarments for men, women and children. Our selection includes brand name clothing and is sold at outlet pricing."

The sisters plan to bring in other items as well, like "hockey mom" purses, homemade jewelry and other fashion accessories, "things that other stores do not offer."

Melissa added, "Our goal is to have the store brimming with stock. We also want to keep people employed in downtown Belleville."

They employ one full-time and two part-time staff.

They purposely chose Century Place for their business "to support the other tenants in the building and their employees. Besides it's also a prime downtown location," said Melanie, adding they are paying current market rent for their new store.

"We hope our store serves as an incentive for other businesses to either open or relocate downtown," she said.

Their store is open Monday to Wednesday from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday from 9:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 4

p.m.

Meanwhile, Gina and Arnold Sikkema are looking forward to their golden years after closing the doors to Highlands Outfitters.

"We've loved downtown and will certainly miss the camaraderie and many good friends we've made in our customers," said the 54-year-old Gina Sikkema. "Being part of the downtown history has been a wonderful experience."

Arnold, her 59-year-old husband, echoed those comments.

"We were happy with the business and the number of customers we see in downtown Belleville. But it was time to retire. I will miss the interaction with customers and fellow merchants downtown."

The Sikkemas started Highlands Outfitters in 1997 as a retirement project "and eight years later, we are really retiring."

He retired in 1999 after working 30 years at Nortel in Belleville while his wife retired this past June after a 30-year teaching career.

They started with a small 500 square foot operation in the Bell Tower Centre before expanding the business and moving into the Reid's Dairy plaza.

"But downtown is where we wanted to be and so we moved here in the summer of 2003," said Gina Sikkema.

They leased 2,000 square feet of retail space downtown and sold everything from canoes, kayaks and skis to camping gear, technical clothing "and anything else for the outdoor experience."

She said the couple will now use the kayaks, canoes and skis they have been selling for the past eight years for their own retirement.

"We simply plan to relax and enjoy the great outdoors," she said.