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By Henry Bury
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One of the oldest businesses in downtown Belleville is pedalling down the street.

Stephen Licence Bicycle & Hobbies will be moving March 1 into its fifth downtown

location since the retail and service operation was established by the late Stephen Licence in 1918.

The new location at 288-290 Front St. — home of Changing Times book store before it closed last month — will house the business well into the next century, vows Gerry Bongard.

"This is another move for the company and the final move because this new location will perpetuate the company for many years to come," said the 74-year-old Bongard, who has owned and operated Stephen Licence for the past 47 years.

For 30 of those years, he operated the business in the former McCarthy Theatre — now the Empire Theatre.

Bongard and his wife, Carole, — youngest daughter of founder Stephen Licence — recently purchased the 288-290 Front St. building so that their son, Kevin, could continue operating the family business.

"The fact that we have family interests in continuing the business makes it a happy occasion," Bongard said.

Renovations are now under way to convert the former Barratt's Stationery and Loblaws building into two separate addresses. Their business that sells and services bicycles, carries hobbies, crafts and sports equipment, sharpens skates and makes keys will be housed in about 4,000 square feet of space at 288 Front St. while Bongard said he hopes to rent next door at 290 Front St. to another retailer.

Bongard is also establishing a rear entrance for customers to access from the Riverside parking lot.

Stephen Licence will be moving from rented space at 357 Front St. — formerly the Bellestar Theatre — to the new location by early March without having to interrupt business.

The latest move represents a new chapter in the 85-year history of

Stephen Licence, said Bongard.

"It's the first time in 85 years that Stephen Licence will be located on the west side of Front Street and in the core of the downtown. Prior to that, it has always been on the east side of the street and north of Victoria Avenue," he said.

Stephen Licence began in 1918 at 333 Front St. when Stephen Licence purchased the bicycle sales and repair shop from Chris Lewis, who had decided to get into repairing automobiles.

Stephen Licence moved his business to 299 Front St. in 1935 and ran it until he died in 1952. Alex McGlashon, a longtime employee, purchased the business and continued to operate for another five years.

Bongard bought the business from McGlashon Feb. 1, 1957, and currently has the distinction of being one of the longest serving business owners in downtown

Belleville.

A fire in 1972 forced Bongard to move his business to the former McCarthy Theatre building at 321 Front St. that had been sitting vacant for 12 years before he decided to purchase it.

"It was the only place on Front Street that was lively and big enough for our business," he said.

He sold the building to Mark Rashotte in March of 2002 who, in turn, converted it into the highly-successful Empire Theatre.

"I am extremely glad. It's such a wonderful place now and a big boost to the community and downtown Belleville," said Bongard. "Under the circumstances, it was a longtime wish of mine that someone would revive the theatre."

After selling the former McCarthy Theatre building, Bongard move his operation into rented space at the former Bellstar Theatre building "with the idea that we would still

search for something more suitable and a permanent location in the city.

"We had to compact our inventory to fit into the current location and that leaves us the door open to expand the business once again."

Bongard said he's thrilled to once again own a downtown property for his operation.

"I bought the building with the idea of continuing on with the family business well into the next century," he said.

Kevin Bongard said he will carry on in his father's footsteps "if so lucky for another 85 years."

He has already spent the 24 years in the family business "and I'm quite excited about having a new building in which to carry on the tradition," he said. "I am very pleased our home is downtown because things look quite prosperous downtown with the Empire Theatre and other business that help draw people here."

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