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Longtime retail space that was once a Ben Franklin store is losing Heart ‘N Home Treasures, but owner said he’s committed to finding a new shop to take its place

Heart ’N Home Treasures, which has been a staple of downtown Port Washington for the past 14 years, is closing its doors on Aug. 31, owner Sara Grover said Tuesday.

AFTER 14 YEARS on Franklin Street in downtown Port, Heart N’ Home Treasures is closing its doors on Aug. 31. Building owner Jim Biever said he is committed to finding another retail business to take its place.
Photo by Sam Arendt

“It’s been 14 great years. I just didn’t have the time to devote to the business,” said Grover, who is also executive director of Port Washington Main Street.

“It’s taxing enough to run a business. To run a business and have the responsibilities I have as Main Street director was difficult.

“I think I better serve this community as Main Street director.”

The property at 123 N. Franklin St. has been a longtime retail stronghold for Port Washington, and building owner Jim Biever said he is committed to continuing that tradition.

“It’s important for us to keep it retail,” said Biever, whose family operated a retail store in the building from the 1940s to 1990. “We’re open to anything, but we would like to continue with retail uses for downtown.”

Grover, whose mother has been running Heart 'N Home Treasures for her, said they have enjoyed their tenure downtown but needed to decide the future of the business.

She took the step with the blessing of the Main Street board of directors, Grover added.

"It's tough to do two full-time jobs and do them both well," said Mayor Scott Huebner, a member of the Main Street board of directors. "I give her credit for being able to juggle both for so long."

She had two buyers lined up at one time, Grover said, but one backed out because of family issues and the other deal fell through.

THE BEN FRANKLIN store run by the Biever family, shown here in a February 1975, was a mainstay of downtown Port Washington from the 1940s to 1990.
Press file photo

Now, she said, she will work with Biever to find a new tenant for the 4,800-square-foot space.

Biever said he has already fielded inquiries from people who would continue to use the property for retail operations.

"I'm pretty optimistic it won't sit too long," he said. "I think I'd hold out for the right retail tenant."

The building has a long tenure in downtown. Biever said his grandfather Emil ran a dry-goods store there, first renting the space and then purchasing the building from Clarence Hill in the 1940s.

Fire destroyed the building on Dec. 3, 1941. It started when a cleaning lady fell asleep on the upper floor of the building with a lit cigarette, Biever said. His grandfather rebuilt the structure.

"On a humid day, you can still smell smoke upstairs," he said. "It was rebuilt during World War II, when it was difficult to get materials."

The Biever family began operating a Ben Franklin store — a five and dime store — in the 1950s, Biever said. In 1975, the shop expanded into two adjoining storefronts, a pharmacy and insurance company.

The Ben Franklin store went out of business about 1990, Biever said, as his father Vernon realized the retail operation was too much to handle along with his travel business and his job as the photographer for the Green Bay Packers. Other family members had no interest in taking over the business.

In 1992, Biever Travel expanded into the corner space, leaving the retail operations occupying much of the original footprint of the store started by Emil Biever.

After the Ben Franklin store closed, other retail operations found a home in the storefront at the corner of Franklin and Main streets, including a Value Plus store, remote-controlled race car shop and later Heart ’N Home Treasures.

“It’s an important part of downtown,” Biever said. “It’s been in the family for a long time. We’d like to see it continue to be an important part of the downtown.”