

# Closing day for Towne West: a look back at how it started, what went wrong

BY DENISE NEIL  
dneil@wichitaeagle.com

The end of its Wichita run has been drawn out and a bit humiliating, marked with delinquent bills, frequent power shut-offs, and vacancies galore.

But back in October 1980, when Towne West Square first opened its doors, the rapidly growing west side of the city celebrated the 975,000-square-foot shopping center, built at a cost of \$50 million and filled with a dream roster of 1980s stores: B Dalton Booksellers, Camelot Music, Spencer's Gifts, Casual Corner, Chick-fil-A and Orange Julius, plus anchor stores JCPenney, Montgomery Ward and Dillard's.

The west side had something its residents had coveted since Towne East Square opened five years earlier: its own mall.

An official Towne West grand opening celebration in March of 1981 included appearances by several mid-level celebrities: Grandpa Jones from television's "Hee Haw" put on a concert in the mall's center court. Susan Richardson of "Eight is Enough" fame greeted customers at clothing store Motion Pant. And basketball star Meadowlark Lemon participated in a basketball shootout.

Now, 45 years later, Towne West is dead. With a couple of exceptions, the mall's remaining tenants were notified by the new owner they would need to vacate the property by June 30, though anchors JCPenney, Dillard's Clearance Center and Boulevard Theatres get to stay.

The new owners apparently want to use the property for industrial development, a plan that was approved by the Wichita City Council in May.

Over the weekend, several Wichitans stopped into the once-bustling mall to see it one last time.

They walked slowly through the stuffy, un-air-conditioned building gazing into gated store fronts, some still filled with unclothed mannequins and empty racks. "Closing sale" signs still hung in many windows.

As of Saturday, all that was left in the main part

of Towne West were three stores — a perfume vendor in a center kiosk plus memorabilia store Superstar Sports and a clothing store called In-cense. Barriers were set up to block off the entrances into Dillard's Clearance Center and JCPenney, both of which were still bustling with business over the weekend.

The mall's candy and gum vending machines and a few kiddie rides were still set up, and some visitors took the opportunity to get one last treatment from the mall's automated massage chairs. One man propped the framed, autographed photo of Patrick Mahomes that he'd just purchased from Superstar Sports up against the side of his massage chair, leaned it all the way back and closed his eyes.

## A BIG WIN FOR THE WEST SIDE

The proposal for Towne West Square first started circulating in early 1975, just as Towne East Square — billed as Wichita's first regional shopping center — was nearly ready to open.

A development group that included Melvin Simon and Associates of Indianapolis and JCP Realty of New York, had met with city officials about the project, which it wanted to build at U.S. 54 and Maple between I-235 and Tracy Street. The group told The Wichita Eagle and Beacon newspaper it was optimistic that any traffic and drainage problems potentially facing the project could be solved. After all, they said, the mall could potentially bring 3,000 jobs to Wichita.

But some Wichitans were not persuaded, including then-vice mayor Connie Peters, who was already upset about the traffic congestion she expected around Towne East. Mike Seltzer, the owner of Mike Seltzer Jewelers, also spoke out against the proposed mall while campaigning for a seat on the County Commission that year, telling the newspaper, "The city is creating a cancer right now with new shopping centers, and who in the hell is paying for it? The taxpayer."



FILE PHOTO The Wichita Eagle

Tinder Box West was one of the first businesses in Towne West Square when it opened.

Still, in July of that year, the Wichita City Commission approved the shopping center project by a vote of 3-2, and the developers started platting.

After years of back and forth about traffic and drainage — and who should pay for improving streets that lead to the mall — ground was finally broken in the summer of 1978, and the concrete foundation was poured in December of that year. The mall was designed by Law Kingdon, and the principal construction company on the project was Law Construction.

The single-level, L-shaped mall, which had parking for 5,000 cars and space for five major department stores, took 24,000 man hours to design and another 300,000 to build. When it first opened its doors on Oct. 1 1980, anchor stores JCPenney and Montgomery Ward had already been operating for two months, but only 35 of the planned 115 other shops were ready to go. Later that month, 50 stores were open.

Customers who visited Towne West found a large, open space that featured plant life brought in from Florida, a sculpture from Canada and floor tiles imported from Germany. The mall was built with lots of skylights, which allowed natural light to flood into the space.

Construction was finally complete in early March

of 1981, and a grand opening celebration that ran March 6-8 featured a breakfast of biscuits, sausage and milk, a cowboy/cowgirl costume contest for kids, and a flapjack eating contest.

Anchor tenant Dillard's had opened by then, as had H.J. Wilson, a "catalog showroom merchandiser." By the time the grand opening party happened, the number of stores open was up to 75, and many of them put on special sales or giveaways, including Gingiss Formalwear, Musicland, Naturalizer shoes, Zales and McLeod's.

"It would indeed appear that the addition of Towne West Square means that Wichita's west side has arrived," read an article in a special Wichita Eagle advertising section that was printed in conjunction with the grand opening.

The mall was a hit, and in the years following, Wichitans admitted that the traffic it created was not nearly as bad as they'd feared and that the mall had not drastically hurt business at other area retailers.

In 1992, Towne West underwent a \$16.5 million remodeling project that included the addition of a new section that would house the Sears that was leaving Twin Lakes Shopping Center at 21st and Amidon for the mall. (It opened at Towne West in 1993.) The remodel also included the expansion of the mall's food court, new

flooring and an updated look.

In October 1997, The Wichita Eagle published a story saying that Towne West was enjoying its highest occupancy rate since it first opened in 1980: In-demand store Eddie Bauer was about to open — which was a big coup considering that Towne East didn't have one. The Gap was also in talks to add a Towne West store, and recent openings of trendy retailers like Bath & Body Works had boosted traffic. Only two storefronts were vacant, mall managers told the paper.

In 2001, Dillard's announced that it was expanding its presence in the mall. It took over the store left vacant when the Montgomery Ward chain declared bankruptcy and closed its stores nationwide the previous year. Dillard's moved men's and children's clothing into that space and kept women's clothing and housewares where they were. The move nearly doubled Dillard's square footage at the mall.

## TOWNE WEST TAKES SOME HITS

But as the years went on giant shopping malls began to fall out of fashion, Towne West began taking hits. When the open-air shopping center NewMarket Square opened in 2001, retail and restaurant customers began shifting their loyalty to North Maize Road.

In 2014, Towne West became one of 44 enclosed malls and 54 strip centers that owner Simon Malls spun off into Washington Prime, a publicly traded real estate investment trust. The chain said it wanted to concentrate its focus and resources on its larger malls and retail centers.

Then, in December of 2014, Towne West lost Sears, whose parent company had struggled to compete with big box retailers like Wal-Mart and the blow from Internet sales. In 2017, Dillard's closed one of its two Towne West locations, saying it would start operating a clearance outlet out of the remaining space.

Then, in 2018, Wells Fargo said it would

foreclose on Towne West after its owner, Towne West LLC, failed to make payments into accounts set aside for improvements and repairs. The following year, Kohan Retail Investment Group from Great Neck, New York, bought the mall, which at the time was about 87% occupied, for \$14 million and vowed to improve it.

But the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 only deepened Towne West's troubles. In 2022, it was down to 60% occupied, and the food court was mostly empty. (Meanwhile, the larger Towne East Square got a multi-million dollar remodel in 2022, the same year it announced the impending arrival of sporting goods giant Scheels.)

Towne West's owners, looking for ways to increase occupancy, started offering shorter-term leases to local businesses and said they would try to think of less-conventional uses for the space, which in recent years had housed nightclubs, call centers, nonprofits — even a church.

But in 2024, stores started regularly reporting that the water and electricity were being turned off at Towne West. The shutdowns were so frequent, Towne West became a local punchline.

Finally, in February of this year, Kohan sold the property. Towne West tenants got their eviction notices in mid-June.

This weekend's visitors to the mall included a few of its dedicated mall walkers, who were perspiring their way through final workouts.

Here and there, nostalgic visitors could be overheard reminiscing about the mall's better days. Two men stopped and stared into the dark Spencer's store, talking quietly to each other. A group of people followed a dog on a leash through the empty halls, passing mall sleigh benches that a Texas-based office furniture store has been trying to sell on Facebook marketplace.

One older man loudly announced to a woman walking past him that the mall was closing — for good — after the weekend.

She responded with disbelief.

Contributing: Kylie Cameron of The Wichita Eagle

Denise Neil: 316-268-6327, @deniseneil

# Israel says Gaza operation nears end as Monday toll hits 100

BY CINDY RIECHAU  
dpa/The Tribune Content Agency

TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

An end to Israel's current war in the Gaza Strip is near, Defense Minister Israel Katz said on Monday, as the daily death toll in the Palestinian territory was reported to be at least 100.

"We are now approaching the conclusion of the operation in Gaza," Katz said in a statement, a week after the Jewish state ended its short war with Iran.

He reiterated Israel's objectives in the conflict, including the release of all hostages and the defeat of the Islamist group Hamas.

The war was sparked by Hamas and other Palestinian militants launching an unprecedented terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

US President Donald Trump had stated over the weekend that he expects a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict soon. However, it was unclear what Trump's statement was based on.

Now Katz has appeared to confirm Trump's optimism, but Palestinian sources say it came on a bloody day in the coastal strip.

At least 34 people were killed in Gaza City, staff at the nearby Shifa Hospital told dpa, after eyewitnesses reported that a café on

the promenade was hit by an Israeli attack.

Among the victims were said to be several minors and women, as well as a journalist.

Hamas, which controls Gaza, stated instead that the attack targeted a camp for displaced people on the beach, while the Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that a rest area on the beach was struck.

Israel's military announced that it would investigate the reports.

The army stated that it is targeting Hamas and other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, while emphasizing that it takes measures to protect civilians.

According to medical sources in the strip, at least 100 people were killed in Israeli attacks on Monday.

## IDF SAYS 'LESSONS LEARNED' AT AID CENTERS

Israeli soldiers fatally shot at least 13 Palestinians in the south of the Gaza Strip, near an aid distribution center, Wafa said. It added that 10 others were killed in Israeli shelling in the area of a warehouse in the south of the city of Gaza.

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) has denied similar reports of fatal incidents at its aid centers in the past.

The foundation, which has been criticized by the United Nations and aid agencies operating in the Palestinian Territories, began its work last month following an almost three-

month-long Israeli blockade of aid supplies.

The U.S.-backed GHF says it has since distributed more than 50 million meals to people in the war-torn coastal strip.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) hinted in a statement on Monday that operations around aid centers could have been handled better.

"Following incidents in which harm to civilians who arrived at distribution facilities was reported, thorough examinations were conducted in the Southern Command and instructions were issued to forces in the field following lessons learned," the statement said.

"The aforementioned incidents are under review by the competent authorities in the IDF."

The claims made by all sides cannot currently be independently verified.

## CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

● A June 29 story about Diego Segui incorrectly reported he died in Washington state. He actually passed away in Kansas City, Kansas.

● A report on 1A June 27 about a citizens group finding potential cuts in Wichita's budget contained outdated information. The city had projected deficits for 2026 and 2027 but now projects surpluses for both years.

● A report on Page 6A June 21 had incorrect end dates for fireworks sales and use in Bel Aire. The correct date is July 4.

See an error or another problem with content in this edition? Report it by calling 1-888-905-2036. To report delivery or account issues, call 800-200-8906.

## THE WICHITA EAGLE

### CUSTOMER SERVICE

24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
Contact our customer service center at

**1-800-200-8906**

or [kansas.com/myaccount](https://kansas.com/myaccount).

### WEEKLY SUBSCRIPTION PUBLISHED RATES

Wednesday, Friday and Sunday: \$34.99/week\*

Sunday: \$34.99/week\*

Wednesday/Sunday: \$34.99/week\*

Single-copy rates: Daily \$3\*/Sunday \$5.99\*/Special Editions \$7.99/\$9.99.

Digital only, including Edition: \$34.99 per week\*  
\*plus applicable sales tax

Subscriptions renew automatically at the then-current rate (up to \$34.99/week) unless canceled. Payments are non-refundable and include applicable tax. Payments, credits, debits, and price changes may adjust your expiration date. A \$0.59 weekly supply-chain charge and a \$4.99 fee for mailed renewal bills apply. Home delivery includes the Thanksgiving Edition; premium fees of \$4.99 apply on 4/13, 6/22, 8/24, 10/19, and 12/26 and \$9.99 on 5/11, 12/7 in 2025, and on 4/26, 7/26, 9/27, 11/25, and 12/27 in 2026. Content delivery methods may vary, and print subscriptions may be substituted with digital editions. Rate change notices are sent 30 days before they take effect. To cancel, contact us 30 days before expiration at 1-800-200-8906 or at <https://kansas.com/cancel>. Cancellations apply at the end of the current term. Additional Terms of Service take effect at <https://www.kansas.com/terms-of-service>

### ADVERTISE

Retail: 316-268-6371

Place a Classified Ad: 316-268-6000 or online at [classifieds.kansas.com](https://classifieds.kansas.com)

Legals: [legals@wichitaeagle.com](mailto:legals@wichitaeagle.com)

Obituaries: 316-268-6508, [obits@wichitaeagle.com](mailto:obits@wichitaeagle.com)

### EAGLE EXECUTIVES

Michael Roehman, Executive Editor  
316-269-6753, [mroehman@wichitaeagle.com](mailto:mroehman@wichitaeagle.com)

Marcia Werts, Managing Editor  
316-268-6216, [mwerts@wichitaeagle.com](mailto:mwerts@wichitaeagle.com)

Dion Lefler, Opinion Editor  
316-268-6527, [dlefler@wichitaeagle.com](mailto:dlefler@wichitaeagle.com)

The Wichita Eagle (ISSN 10463127) is published three times a week, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday by Wichita Eagle and McClatchy Co., 301 N. Main, Suite 1550, Wichita, KS 67202-2830 (by appointment only).

Periodicals Postage Paid at Wichita, KS (USPS 12050)

Postmaster: Send all UAA to CFS: NON-POSTAL & MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to McClatchy 1601 Alhambra Blvd Suite 100 Sacramento, CA 95816.

A McClatchy Newspaper

**McClatchy**