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FEATURED

McNellie's to close its location in Norman, citing city's development focus

By Adam Troxell | Transcript Staff Writer Dec 30, 2018



McNellie's at Abner's Ale House in Norman is set to close Jan. 5. Ownership announced the decision in a Facebook post Friday.

Adam Troxell / The Transcript



McNellie's has announced its Abner's Ale House location in downtown Norman will close.

Staff confirmed its last day will be Jan. 5. A post on the pub's Facebook page on Friday said "this will be the last week." The post cited "development patterns" in the city as the reason for closing.

Elliot Nelson, founder and CEO of McNellie's, explained that when the 121 E. Main St. location was opened 10 years ago, it was under the impression that downtown Norman would be developing around it. Since then, however, he said ownership has not seen that happen in the manner expected.

"At the time, I was friends with the guy who ran the chamber," Nelson said. "There was a master plan and an effort underway to tie it back to the campus. I think at this point, ten years later, we were wrong. It just didn't really happen."

Nelson said much more development has occurred along Interstate 35. Ten years is also round the time that University North Park began to see development, with a tax increment finance (TIF) arrangement approved for that area.

"We were wrong about where the growth was going to happen," Nelson said. "For a while, we were able to make a go of it."

But as the years passed, keeping the finances sound at Abner's became more difficult, Nelson said. When faced with the decision to renew the lease -- which expires March 1 -- for another five years, it was decided closing the location was a better business move.

In addition to a large selection of beer on tap, McNellie's has been a staple for various events: weekend brunch, pint nights, quiz nights and board game nights, and some live music. And there was, of course, St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

The development hasn't occurred as desired, Nelson said. For example, a lack of multi-family residential development around the area, he said, prevented the pub from taking advantage of a market they consider important.

The James E. McNellie's Public House brand has three other locations -- one in Oklahoma City and two in Tulsa -- while the ownership group has 19 other locations that will remain operating, Nelson said. The resources that would have gone into the Norman location will immediately be used to reinforce the personnel already working for the company.

Longer-term plans are still being considered.

"We continue to operate 19 different restaurants," Nelson said. "I think we just maybe picked the wrong spot in Norman. I thought [downtown] would start to thrive within the last decade."

In the Facebook post, ownership explained that those with mugs on the McNellie's wall in Norman can come pick it up when they say a final goodbye in the next week. It can also be transferred to the Oklahoma City location.

"We will miss the friends and regulars we've made through the years, and most of all, we'll miss the dedicated employees who helped serve them. Please come by to say farewell, and grab your mug if you have one," the post reads. "We're also happy to transfer your mug to our McNellie's in Oklahoma City, where hopefully we'll see you soon."

McNellie's last day in Norman will occur just two days before the college football National Championship game.

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Adam Troxell

