

It's final curtain for drive-in

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Medicine Hat News

The only remaining drive-in theatre in Alberta has officially screened its final film. Landmark Cinemas announced on Tuesday Redcliff's Gemini Drive-in has been closed, permanently.

To compensate for the costs of running the facility only four months out of the year, Landmark Cinemas sold eight acres of the land to Big Screen Properties six years ago. Although the land was purchased with the understanding Big Screen Properties could eventually develop it, Landmark continued to lease the property every summer.

This year, negotiations have ended and the property has been turned over to the new owners.

"We've analyzed each and every spring," said Richard Ward, the Landmark representative for Medicine Hat who ran the Gemini drive-in for the last 25 years.

Landmark considered factors such as the amount of people coming to the Drive-in and the summer films being released.

"You throw all that mix together to make the determination. We took all those things into account," Ward explained.

Ultimately, the decision rested heavily on the little income brought in by such a large facility.

"It was tight, but because of the popularity, we kept it running," Ward explained, adding people would come from across the province to watch an outdoor film in their car and pajamas.

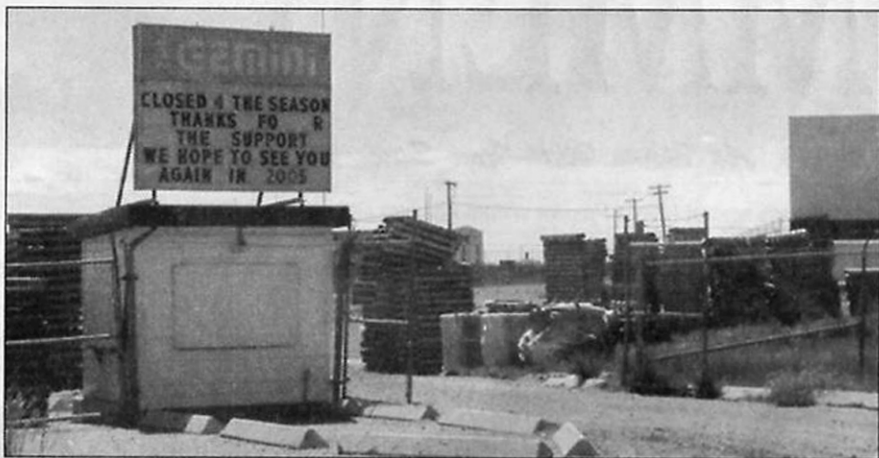
"But attendance has been down. It was huge for the beginning and for the ending weekend.

"Like any other business, a business needs to be profitable."

Ward said there has been competition from the 14 other screens in the city and it was time to finally close the theatre.

"We were kind of surprised we made it this long."

The decision was made on Tuesday after discussions with Landmark



— SOUTHERN ALBERTA NEWSPAPERS PHOTO

This is the last time the sign outside of the Gemini Drive-in in Redcliff will read closed for the season. As of Wednesday, the sign will indicate the facility has been closed permanently.

Cinemas of Canada suggested the time was appropriate to stop renting the land and allow the owner of the property to develop it.

"At this point in time, the two plans just coincided," said Ward.

Harold Wilson, executive director for the Economic Development Alliance of Southeast Alberta, said he is more than disappointed with the loss.

"Its days were numbered" said Wilson of the property's fate since the sale. Wilson has been looking into the matter for the last few months.

"I think that's such a valuable asset to the community. (Landmark) never played it up as a community asset."



— NEWS FILE PHOTO

Movie aficionados enjoy an outdoor flick as the sun sets over the Gemini Drive-in Theatre in Redcliff last July. It was announced on Tuesday the drive-in has closed permanently.

Although it may have been underutilized, Wilson said the drive-in was a piece of tourist infrastructure and the community would have rallied in support of the facility had they known of the threat of closure.

"We were not given this opportunity," Wilson said.

"Here's an asset that is gone. One can't ask . . . but no one really said 'hey, what's going on?'"

Wilson said he did not believe customer support was the direct source of the problem, and if it was, the public should have been notified.

"Don't complain you didn't have the people if you didn't reach out," said Wilson.

The Gemini was the last drive-in in Alberta and among only a handful remaining across the country.

The drive-in was originally planned to have two screens when it was built in 1974. In the late 1990s, it moved to closed circuit FM broadcast, where families could enjoy a film comfortably inside their vehicle.

When the theatre opened for the May long weekend last year, no one realized it would be the drive-in's last summer.

On Tuesday, the sign outside the Cinema read: The Gemini, Closed 4 the season. Thanks for the support. We hope to see you again in 2005.

Ward said this sign would be changed on Wednesday.