

# It's official — Ford's closing

## Sad news for store workers

By JUDY BRILL  
STAFF WRITER

Ford's employees got the sad-but-not-surprising news this morning that the store is starting a going-out-of-business sale tomorrow.

Inventory has been low for some time, and "sale" signs and marked-down price tags are evident in every department.

Before the doors opened, store manager Linda Finlayson

relayed the information to Ford's remaining 40 employees, some of whom have worked for the company as many as 22 years.

"I'm very sad, very depressed," Finlayson said, standing in front of several pallets piled with unopened cardboard boxes of merchandise.

The sale to empty the store of remaining inventory will continue until the doors officially

close. Employees are already in the process of moving all the second-floor merchandise downstairs for the sale.

Finlayson has 14 years invested in Ford's, the last two overseeing the Watsonville operation. She confessed she found the store's closing hard to even talk about. "Not that we didn't expect it ... but we kept hoping our knight in shining

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By LANE WALLACE  
STAFF WRITER

It's official: Ford's Department Store, a fixture in downtown Watsonville for 140 years, is going out of business.

The store announced this morning that it would begin a going-out-of-business sale tomorrow and close the store Feb. 14.

The announcement confirms what had been rumored for months — that the financially strapped Charles Ford Co. would not survive. The company declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in October.

Closure of the Watsonville store

will be the final step in the rapid demise of the Ford's chain since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

A group of 22 Watsonville business people, headed by Granite Rock Co. owner Betsy Woolpert, are working toward keeping the Ford's site going as a retail business.

The group has contacted a number of companies and people connected with the retail industry.

"We're looking under stones" to see what possibilities exist, Woolpert said. Although nobody has stepped forward yet, "We've only just begun" efforts to find a new operator, Woolpert said.

Woolpert said the group is looking at a number of scenarios about how retail business would operate in the 80,000 square foot Ford's building. The present store opened in October 1991, replacing the old store, which had to be torn down after the earthquake.

The site wouldn't necessarily be operated by one owner, Woolpert said, but could be a number of separately-owned shops under one roof.

Woolpert said the Ford's chain made \$300,000 in 1988, and the Watsonville store grossed \$9.1 million that year.

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# FORD'S

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Woolpert said the new store failed because "it just wasn't comfortable. They took out the old lunch counter which was open to the rest of the store, and the whole personal service atmosphere changed. There was no longer a real housewares department.

"The quality of the merchandise, many of us felt, didn't match the prices put on it, and it seemed there was never enough selection in the new store. It didn't seem the store did a good job catering either to the Latino or Anglo shopper," Woolpert said.

Others on the committee headed by Woolpert include many of the movers and shakers in Watsonville business.

They are: Jerry Hernandez, executive director of Main Street Watsonville; Randy Repass, president of West Marine; Rowland Rebele, owner of several newspapers; George Schaaf, chief financial officer of Well-Pict Berries; Ray Travers, apple grower; William Sambrailo, owner of Charles Sambrailo Paper Co.; Don Cooley, retired IBM executive; Hugh Hudson and Wayne Hall, insurance company owners; Diane Cooley and Lorraine Litchfield, fifth- and sixth-generation Watsonvillians, respectively; Bob Dwyer, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce; Carl Blanke, real estate agent and chairman of the Watsonville Economic Development Department;

Al Smith, lawyer and president of the Chamber of Commerce; Rocky Franich, auto agency co-owner; Bill Burgstrom, commercial real estate agent; Ann Soldo, former mayor; Dick Solari, board chairman of Granite Construction Co.; Aaron Berman and

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armor would save us," she said.

The manager had nothing but praise for her employees, all of whom stuck with it and kept trying to smile through the months of uncertainty, she said.

For herself, Finlayson said, she would worry later about what she will do when the store is gone, adding, "The last week will probably be really tough."

Beulah Adams, an 11-year employee who has been commuting from Salinas since that Ford's closed, was one of the first to arrive for work this morning. She said she learned of the closing while watching television last night.

Having worked in retail for more than 37 years, she said now "it feels like the end of my career. But I won't give up," she added, and planned to look for another job.

All the employees interviewed said they were saddened about the closing. They described the staff as a family, and said Ford's was a wonderful company to work for.

Of the handful of customers arriving for some early shop-

ping, most were unaware that the final decision had been made to close the store for good.

Watsonville High School juniors Susie Carvalho, Autumn Davis and Alicia Matsuoka, learned of the closing when they stopped by on their home-room break. "That's really sad." "Bummer," they agreed.

They said they liked to browse Ford's selection of dresses and gowns, and that they would especially miss the candy counter they visited frequently during their lunch hours. They expected they would do their shopping at the Capitola Mall or in Salinas once Ford's is gone.

Two women looking at handbags who declined to be named said they hadn't heard the recent announcement. "It will have a huge impact on the area; a lot of people will lose their jobs," one said. They felt the closing would be harder on the older employees, who would have a harder time finding new employment.

Asked about a rumor that Gottschalk's would move in, they said they doubted Ford's quality and dedication to service would be possible to replace.

Dan Lester, real estate developers, and Stella Romo, owner of a restaurant and other downtown property.

Ford's officials are working with the committee.

Before the quake, Ford's had 12 stores, from San Luis Obispo to Half Moon Bay. Some stores didn't reopen after the earthquake, and others have closed in the last few months as the store's financial problems worsened.

The store in Pacific Grove

closed last month, Half Moon Bay closed this month, and the San Luis Obispo store is closing this week. Watsonville, the flagship store, will be the last to close.

When it closes its doors, it will be the end of the oldest continuously operating department store in California. Ford's began as a general merchandise store in 1852 and has been operating continuously — except for the earthquake-induced closure — in the same location ever since.