

Ford's is forced to its knees

5 of 13 stores are damaged

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At Ford's department stores, the third time held no charm.

Twice before the 137-year-old Watsonville retailer had survived a major earthquake — one in 1865, the other in 1906. But after Tuesday's disaster, Ford's may have run out of luck.

Of the local chain's 13 stores, five were damaged. In Santa Cruz, the Ford's in the Pacific Garden Mall was destroyed when the adjoining building collapsed on it. Most — if not all — of the chain's 110,000-square-foot flagship store in Watsonville faces demolition after a long fissure cracked the store from foundation to roof. Stores in Morgan Hill, Gilroy and Hollister also suffered.

Last Friday, company officials estimated the damage to buildings and merchandise at \$18 million. George Menasco, president of Charles Ford Co., issued a statement asking federal, state and local officials for financial assistance.

"Always before, we have rebuilt, but this time, we are going to need a lot of help," Menasco said.

In Watsonville, local officials said the ability of Ford's to get back on its feet could prove crucial for the city. Originally built in 1852, Ford's Watsonville headquarters is the city's largest store and the linchpin of the downtown business district.

"We have to have Ford's," said Charlene G. Shaffer, executive director of the Watsonville Area Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture. As both the city's largest source of sales tax revenue and a business that draws many shoppers, "Ford's is a very strong anchor," Shaffer said. "It's the key to redevelopment downtown."

Harold Hyde, senior vice president of the chain, said the company is exploring every possible source of money. The chain's future, he said, "all depends on the financing."