

Ford's stores embark on road to recovery

By JAMIE MARKS
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WATSONVILLE — The Oct. 17 earthquake hit Ford's Department store hard.

The 7.1 quake decimated the flagship 110,000-square-foot store in downtown Watsonville; collapsed the roof of the 26,000-square-foot store on the Pacific Garden Mall, killing one older woman and seriously injuring another woman; and forced the department store to vacate a building in downtown Hollister.

But the long road to recovery is beginning, according to Ford's senior vice president Hal Hyde.

The rebirth is getting under way this week with the opening of Ford's in a new location in downtown Watsonville, at what used to be the Dick Bruhn's clothing store at West Beach and Rodriguez streets.

The grand opening for the 32,000-square-foot store will be Saturday, but Hyde said he hopes to have the doors open a day or two earlier.

"We're pleased, and finally on the long road back," Hyde said.

The return of Ford's is important not only to the company, but to downtown Watsonville, which gets more than a quarter of its retail

sales tax from the store, said City Manager John Radin.

"There are all kinds of reasons why Ford's is important, but the main thing is we need to get business back downtown," Radin said.

The City Council cleared the way for Ford's re-opening this week by waiving a parking requirement.

For more than a week, workers have been scrambling to stock the revamped store with clothing for men, women, teens and children. The store will also hold housewares and some furniture.

Hyde said the company intends to bring back the popular lunch counter and beauty salon in the near future.

Ford's was back in business here less than two weeks after the earthquake, in temporary quarters at the Crossroads Shopping Center and Westridge Business Park. But Hyde said the company wanted to be downtown again, and actively sought a location while the company's plans are finalized.

As to downtown Santa Cruz, Hyde said he's "unhappy we don't have a market in downtown. We haven't found a new location. At this point, all we're doing is providing parking for downtown Santa Cruz."

In Hollister, Ford's managed to

get back in business before Christmas by moving merchandise from the main store into a new building nearby. Ford's has three stores in Hollister, but only one suffered earthquake damage, Hyde said.

Ford's is the oldest store in the state, dating back to 1852. "It was founded by Charles Ford, and the first store was at that corner," Hyde said, referring to the main store at Beach and Main streets in downtown Watsonville.

Hyde said the company remains a family-run business, owned primarily by three families.

Over the years, Ford's rebuilt and added onto the Watsonville store several times, resulting in a building that took up most of one side of the 400 block of Main Street. That building had to be demolished as a result of severe earthquake damage.

The company expanded into Santa Cruz, Hollister, Pacific Grove, Salinas and three other locations in recent years. A few years ago it bought Riley's department store in San Luis Obispo County.

Last year, Ford's posted sales of \$41 million, Hyde said.

Since the quake, the company's officers have set up shop in mod-

ular trailers in the former Watsonville store's parking lot. The computer center, credit check and receiving operations are handled in a building next to the old store.

The company's officers still don't know how or when they will rebuild. At this point, they intend to lease the former Dick Bruhn space for three years while their plans take shape.

"The next step is the long-term planning for Santa Cruz and Watsonville. Ford's suffered major plant loss ... and our plans are not

there yet," Hyde said. "We have a lot of irons in the fire, but we don't have anything to announce."

Because Small Business Administration loans only go up to \$500,000, Ford's is looking at other options to help finance its rebuilding program. Among the alternatives is a city-backed bond for a low-interest loan, proposed by state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville.

"We're a major city contributor to the tax base, and we do well in Santa Cruz, too. The cities are very anxious to get us back," Hyde said.