



Mike McCollum

Ford's vice president Hal Hyde stands on escalator — Watsonville's first — inside new store.

New Ford's to open Oct. 17

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If a Watsonville resident of, say, the 1860s were to revisit his old hometown today, he would hardly recognize the place. But amidst all the changes, he might spot two familiar sights: the Plaza, even if it is no longer used as a hayfield; and the Charles Ford Co., still in the same location even if it is hardly the same little general store.

More accurately, Ford's is

just about to return to its historic location, having been unceremoniously dispossessed by

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nature in the form of the devastating earthquake of Oct. 17, 1989. For the first time since its founding 137 years before, Ford's department store ceased to operate at Main and Beach (once Third) streets. But it did

not cease to operate. In a matter of days it had reopened in a vacant building in the Westridge Business Park, and soon thereafter took over the quarters vacated by Dick Bruhn at Rodriguez and West Beach, where it has been operating while a new building was rising on the old site.

At 5:04 p.m. on Oct. 17, two years to the minute after the big earthquake, the Charles Ford Co. — which in the years since

its founding has become a mini-chain with stores in other Monterey Bay Area communities and the San Luis Obispo area — will officially open the doors of its new flagship store to customers.

The opening will go off as scheduled despite some unforeseen circumstances that threatened to delay it. A buried oil tank from the early part of the century was discovered and had

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to be removed; there were last minute changes to add more display windows and a skylight at the request of the new company president.

On a recent afternoon, the two-story building was buzzing with workers and the tools of what seems like hundreds of different projects — scaffolding, pots full of sticky black stuff or paint, plastic-covered lights, rolls of carpets and linoleum, partially assembled display cases with blueprints taped to them, ladders, dumpsters, portable radios.

Lights and escalators were being tested. The central core, where the escalators cross paths, will get natural light from a massive skylight. There was no glass in it yet, just a blue

plastic covering; afternoon sunlight bathed both stories of the building in blue light.

Some areas of the ceiling were not yet covered, and thick fire-proofed steel beams and columns were visible, revealing the store's determination to weather the next earthquake.

Marble flooring is already laid on the ground floor corridors, and mirrors cover the pillars everywhere. The overall effect, even with all the mess and noise, is of sweeping grandeur, light and color.

"I hope you're as excited about this as I am," Senior Vice President Hal Hyde said as he showed a small group of people through.

On opening day, he said, the store won't be finished or set up the way it's going to be forever. But it will give customers an idea about where it's going.