

DEPARTMENT STORES

Ford's closes fifth store

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Pacific Grove outlet goes, leaving 20 workers jobless

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The financially ailing Charles Ford Co. has quietly closed the Pacific Grove branch of its department store chain, leaving 20 workers suddenly unemployed and a huge, empty building in the middle of the city's downtown.

The blockwide mercantile edifice is the fifth Ford's outlet to close since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed the 140-year-old company's Santa Cruz and Hollister stores.

Last September, California's oldest department store chain closed stores in Gilroy, Half Moon Bay and Salinas. The next month, Ford's filed for protection from creditors under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code.

Company officials confirmed the Pacific Grove store was closed and emptied of merchandise Jan. 6 but declined further comment. Kenney Associates, a Los Gatos management firm that is running the strapped company, is staying mum. Store managers and former employees said the company is reportedly negotiating with a potential buyer for what was once a 13-store chain.

Empty shell

For now, Ford's in Pacific Grove is an empty shell where a week ago there was a lively department store with three floors full of old-fashioned but serviceable wares. Its cases are empty, its hangers are bare, and in its big display windows that line Light-house Avenue, there are no goods, only funeral arrangements of flowers.

In a corner display, a window dresser appears to have created a silent statement to the store's demise, with an arrangement of stepladders set out next to the original blueprints of the Ford's store.

Ford's has a shorter history in Pacific Grove than it does elsewhere. It has owned the Pacific Grove store since 1985, when it bought the building from R.L. Holman Co. Holman's department

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store had been a town fixture since 1924.

Critical to downtown

But despite its relatively recent vintage, Ford's is considered by Pacific Grove residents a critical piece of downtown. For years, the building's penthouse restaurant has been a gathering spot for locals drawn to its sweeping views of Monterey Bay. And for a loyal contingent of elderly customers, the store has been an alternative to driving out of town to shop.

"I feel sorry for a lot of the customers. It's the community store, it really was," said Shirley Hurd, the store manager until she was laid off without notice last week, along with her entire staff. "In Pacific Grove, an institution has died, yes. But hopefully they can find a buyer and put the store together again."

The Ford's store has been an anchor for the Pacific Grove downtown, where several other stores have also closed or changed ownership in recent months.

"For the last little while, it's been kind of in the process of winding down. It's been sort of sad seeing them carrying stuff out of there," said Marabee Boone, executive vice president of the Pacific Grove Chamber of Commerce. "I guess it's been kind of tapering off."

Ford's flagship store in Watsonville reopened in 1991 under new management, rebuilt after the earthquake with the aid of a \$24.2 million loan from the federal Small Business Administration. It was one of the largest loans ever made by the federal agency.