

Cheers greet Ford's rebirth

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Thousands of rose petals rained down on thousands of happy people Thursday afternoon as Ford's department store reopened in Watsonville.

The \$9.5-million, 76,000-square-foot store reopened precisely two years after it was razed due to the Oct. 17, 1989, earthquake. It stands in the exact Main and West Beach streets location the firm has occupied since 1852. The oldest family-owned department store in California, Ford's is considered the "anchor" of downtown Watsonville.

Ford's Senior Vice President Hal Hyde led the crowd in cheers, shortly before opening the store's doors as an all-city band played, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Jim Vicars, Ford's new president, said the Central Coast chain is shedding its conservative image by carrying much more contemporary styles of clothing and other merchandise.

"You're going to walk in here and say, 'This ain't no Ford's,'" Vicars told the crowd.

Shopper Maria Vega of Watsonville agreed. Upon getting a look inside, Vega said, "It's much more modern than the old one. I like all the changes."

Ford's agreed to donate roughly 5 percent of the first night's earnings to Watsonville Community Hospital Foundation.

Almost lost in the huge throng shuffling into the store was Edith Domínguez. Domínguez was seriously hurt inside the Ford's on the Pacific Garden Mall in Santa Cruz during the earthquake.

Thursday she helped cut the ceremonial ribbon along with Vicars and state Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey. She then sat quietly next to the front door as the crowd filed past.

"This day is very symbolic," Domínguez said. "Ford's is coming back and I am, too."

Domínguez, who was pictured in newspapers nationwide being carried out of the smashed Santa Cruz store by volunteer rescuers, said she spent four months in the hospital. She graduated from a wheelchair to a walker, then to a cane.

"I never did get a chance to thank my rescuers," Domínguez said. "I put an ad in the newspaper, but only heard from one rescuer. But I certainly feel good about the progress made in rebuilding Watsonville."

Among the store's new features is a glass-topped atrium in the center of the store — right above Watsonville's first escalators.

Alfonso Delatorre, 10, was among the many children riding on an escalator for the first time. "It feels fun. I like going up and down," he said.

Watsonville Mayor Todd McFar-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Well-wishers greet Edith Domínguez outside the store.

ren cited Ford's as not only being the anchor store, "but also a magnet to draw people downtown.

"For a lot of old-timers, to see Ford's come back is a symbol,"

McFarren said. "They grew up with Ford's."

Vice Mayor Oscar Rios agreed, saying, "It has always been the hub of town."