

New store welcomed, even by competitor

Gottschalks moving into downtown Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — Workers are wheeling in long rolls of carpet. Walls have been moved or removed. And store fixtures are arriving daily.

In 23 days, the two-story building on Main Street vacated by Ford's department store will open under a new name — Gottschalks — the 33rd store for the Fresno-based retail chain.

Store manager Theo Wierdsma is calm amid the chaos, and hopeful the store can "play a significant role in the revitalization of the downtown."

Gottschalks' decision to locate in the heart of the city will bring at least 125 people — employees with regular paychecks and money to spend — downtown, which in recent years has emptied as stores scattered to outlying shopping centers.

Ford's, which had been the anchor store downtown, rebuilt after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake only to fail two years ago in the face of massive debt stemming from the multimillion-dollar rebuilding loan, a tight economy, and changing consumer tastes.

The city has never recovered from Ford's demise.

For that reason, even officials at JC Penney one block away are looking forward to Gottschalks' arrival.

"Gottschalks is an asset to downtown Watsonville ... I think it will increase customer traffic, and all merchants will benefit," said Steve Hess, Penney's manager.

Tim Nichols, Penney's district manager in Sacramento, visited Watsonville in July to survey the store's future.

"Obviously, we want to stay in the community and we want a presence there," he said. "Watsonville is a good market for us, the community has supported us well, and we have no plans on moving the store out of the community."

Wierdsma is delighted by the reception he's gotten so far.

"It's satisfying to see the community so excited about Gottschalks. In 20 years in the retail business, I've never felt this kind of excitement," said Wierdsma, a Scotts Valley resident who joined Gottschalks only a few months ago after eight years with Emporium-Capwell's.

"Gottschalks has a great reputation. They have a more exciting retail environment," he said, explaining his career move. He had been a store manager in Pleasanton and Alameda.

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"The next year or so is going to be very critical for Gottschalks and the downtown," said Jerry Hernandez, executive director of Main Street Watsonville, an agency that's part of a state and national network organized to help revitalize economically depressed downtowns.

"Gottschalks will be establishing its market and targeting its inventory to fit the market. That's how Ford's was successful, by addressing the local market," he said, referring to the store's marketing strategy before the quake hit.

"A number of small businesses downtown will be looking at that, and they will also be learning how to best adapt to a new anchor store," he added.

Manuel Rodrigues, whose ACE Hardware store is in the same block as Gottschalks on Main Street, is taking a wait-and-see approach.

"We have been here for four years," he said. "We're going to have to sit back and see who will be coming back to shop five or six months down the road after the grand opening is over."

Meanwhile, remodeling and painting of the Gottschalks' interior is nearly complete. The new sign will be coming soon.

Hiring is almost complete. Over the past four weeks, Wierdsma and his staff have interviewed almost 1,000 job applicants. Jobs in Watsonville are at a premium, with unemployment at 20 percent.

"We have hired roughly 75 percent of our new employees," Wierdsma said Friday. Almost all of the new workforce lives in Watsonville, with the remainder coming from elsewhere in Santa Cruz County.

Training for sales people begins today. New employees will receive a brief history of Gottschalks, learn about company policy and get hands-on sessions on how to operate a cash register.

Merchandise will begin arriving Aug. 21, with a grand opening on Aug. 29. Workers from other Gottschalks stores will help set up the various departments, Wierdsma said.

The process is nothing new to the chain, which has opened four other stores this year in Carson City, Nev.; Auburn; San Bernardino, and Visalia. A sixth store will open in late October in Tracy.

The store will stock clothing, linens, gifts, housewares, cosmetics, jewelry and luggage.