

Buyer found for Ford's store

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WATSONVILLE — A buyer for the Ford's building has been found and city officials expect a national department store to move into the vacant store.

Mark Quinn, district director of the Small Business Administration

office in San Francisco, confirmed that the sale of the building is expected to be completed next week. Quinn would not, however, reveal any details of the sale, saying the deal is still in negotiations over which vendor or vendors the new owner would bring into the building.

"We wouldn't want to do anything to affect (the sale of Ford's)," said Quinn. He said he does not foresee any problems with the sale, adding that the sale is following the "normal process."

Quinn did say that the buyer is expected to bring at least one major vendor to the store. The

buyer, Quinn said, is "juggling several balls" in trying to close the sale and decide which vendor or vendors will be housed in the building.

"The main issue is that it would be back in productive use," Quinn said. "We are pleased that we are

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moving along on this process."

The news is a blessing to the city, said Councilman Al Alcalá.

"I think it's great," Alcalá said. "I'm anxious to find out who it is."

Alcalá said city officials told him they will announce the name of the buyer next Tuesday.

Alcalá said representatives for the buyer have "walked through" the Ford's building already.

Mayor Tony Campos was also optimistic about the impending deal.

"Ford's Department Store was probably the most important store in Watsonville's downtown," he said yesterday at a Chamber of Commerce Hispanic Business Committee luncheon. "I think (the new store) has the potential to be equally as important."

Ford's was Watsonville's oldest department store and the downtown "anchor" for many years until the 1989 earthquake, which destroyed the store. The Charles Ford Company had been in business in California for 141 years, owning about a dozen stores throughout the coastal area of the state, including a store in Santa Cruz, where a woman was killed during the 1989 earthquake.

The Watsonville store was rebuilt on the same site and opened its doors Oct. 17, 1991, the second anniversary of the earthquake. The new, two-story store was built with a \$24.5 million SBA loan, one of the largest loans ever made by SBA.

At the time of the store's grand opening, hopes were high that the department store would make a complete recovery and once again become the economic linchpin of the downtown area. But it soon became apparent that was not to be.

The city's economy, still reeling from the earthquake and mass layoffs in the food processing industry, proved to be too weak to support the store. A little over a year after its splashy grand opening, the store closed its doors for good, ending a long chapter of Watsonville history.

At the time of its closing, Ford's still owed \$20 million to the SBA. In September, SBA foreclosed on the property. A few weeks later, the City Council agreed to be the lead agent in finding a buyer. The Council hired Legaspi Company, a Southern California-based company, to help in the hunt for a buyer. The city allocated \$88,000 for this effort.

City officials and business representatives are hoping to start a new chapter in the history of downtown Watsonville.

Bob Dwyer, executive director of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce, said bringing a vendor to the Ford's building would be economic and "psychological" boost to downtown rejuvenation.

He pointed to other businesses opening in the downtown area. The largest is the opening at the end of the month of Heilig-Myers, a 40,000 square-foot home furniture store on the 500 block of Main Street. Heilig-Myers, which will open on March 30, is a national chain, with 640 stores across the country.

Dwyer called recent downtown developments "very encouraging."