

Y's Men's Club members paint container for Battels Hardware

By Mike Sprague, Staff Writer
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WHITTIER - The closure of the nearly 40-year-old Board Ford on Dec. 14 could have sent shudders down the spines of city officials, business leaders and even other auto dealerships in the city.

But most are calling Board Ford's closure an isolated incident that doesn't reflect the economic viability of Whittier's auto row.

"From what I heard, the other dealerships are doing well, especially their service departments," said Chris George, president of the Whittier Area Chamber of Commerce.

"It's more of a deal of what's going on with Ford," George said. "Ford is trying a whole new business model, and their model is less dealerships."

That is indicated by the closure of other Ford dealerships in Southern California, such as Claremont, Don Kott in Carson, Keystone in Norwalk and Ford West in Bellflower, George and others connected with the industry say.

"They're closing seven dealers in Southern California," said Allen Statzer, sales manager for Harris Buick Pontiac GMC in Whittier.

"GM is doing OK and our particular dealership is doing OK. Everything is predicated on the economy. We've been through this before. I don't see any reason for doom and gloom."

Still, Whittier's auto row has gone through changes during its last 40 years - including major moves, reductions and increased competition.

Several dealerships, including Sun Nissan, Whittier Dodge, Whittier Kia and Lincoln Mercury have closed during the last 15 years.

An Albertsons stands at the former Lincoln Mercury location and homes are planned for the Dodge and Nissan spots. The Whittier Kia location remains vacant.

Whittier's remaining auto dealerships are Cadillac of Whittier, Community Honda, Harris Buick Pontiac GMC, Saturn of Whittier, Toyota of Whittier, Whittier Chrysler Jeep Dodge and Whittier Mitsubishi.

Whittier's new car dealers are important because they provide about 17 percent of the city's sales-tax revenue or about \$1.6million annually, said Rod Hill, city controller.

"It's a pretty big number," Hill said. "It's something we have to monitor."

George said the auto dealers are important to Whittier in more ways than just sales tax.

"Their dollars help out our local economy, and it's good to have power names as part of our community," he said.

In the beginning, the Whittier dealers were located on Greenleaf Avenue in the Uptown area.

"Most of the old American dealers were there," Councilman Bob Henderson said, referring to Harris Oldsmobile Cadillac, Chevrolet, Dodge and Ford.

But in the 1960s the automobile companies told dealers they had to move to Whittier Boulevard to get better exposure so they could get more customers, Henderson said.

"They moved and scattered along the boulevard," he said.

Several moved to around Michigan Avenue, while Cadillac and Board Ford moved across from the then-Whittwood shopping center.

Foreign companies, such as Honda, Toyota and Nissan, also joined them on Whittier Boulevard.

"They all did much better down there, but they probably had to invest huge amounts of money," Henderson said.

By the 1970s it became fashionable to be near a freeway, something Whittier Boulevard dealers don't have.

"The Cerritos Auto Mall became the model everyone wanted to copy," Henderson said.

Lack of freeway access is probably not the reason the Ford dealers closed, said Todd Leutheuser, executive director of the Southland Motor Car Dealers Association.

"I don't know if you can make the story being on the right location," Leutheuser said. "They were doing great when Ford had 20 to 30 percent market share."

Ford's share in Southern California now is about 8percent, according to his association's Southland Auto Outlook.

While a dealership alongside a freeway will have more exposure, there are disadvantages.

"They have a big nut to crack," said Statzer, referring to overhead. "When you go to a small store, everything has been paid for years. We don't have the overhead."

Statzer's Harris dealership has been in Whittier since 1946.

His dealership was founded by the late Clint Harris, a Whittier College trustee and a friend of President Richard Nixon.

Whittier has other advantages, said Jeff Collier, director of community development.

"You have a situation where Whittier is sort of that hole in the doughnut," Collier said. "We have a captive audience here being so far from a freeway. You have very good income levels in these locations."

Still, it will be a challenge to fill those empty dealerships.

Toyota of Whittier, which now has only 2.5 acres, would like to take over the 5.5-acre Board Ford facility, said Brian O'Donnell, general sales manager for Toyota of Whittier.

"That would be a terrific opportunity for us," O'Donnell said. "It's a beautiful facility."

And Board Ford recently renovated its complex.

"We do need a bigger spot," O'Donnell said. "Toyota wants us to get a different spot. We need help from the city."

But should Toyota move, that would leave another opening in addition to the Whittier Kia vacancy.

Collier said it could be tough, but he believes there are possibilities for new dealers, particularly in some of the lines such as Accura, Infiniti or Lexus.

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