



Whitman Ford to close April 30



By Colleen Wells

TEMPERANCE , MI (WTOL) - Whitman Ford will close its doors at the end of April. Owner Jon Whitman said the decision stems from years of frustration with Bedford Township Officials.

"What they put is through, the township officials, total disregard for any fairness toward us. Or any honesty or integrity. And we've just had our fill," said Whitman.

Whitman owns about 50 acres of land on Lewis Avenue. He said the problems began in 1998, when he put his property up for sale. He wanted the land re-zoned for commercial use. At one point, Wal-Mart was interested in purchasing the property. But, Whitman said Bedford Township officials challenged the re-zoning.

"I think it's hopeless in Bedford, and I'll stick to that word, when you are on the wrong side of this. Our fight has been about zoning... but they really are about, getting treated completely differently," said Whitman.

Township Officials agreed to re-zone part of the property, but a citizen group forced the issue on the ballot in May of 2009. Citizens rejected the re-zoning issue. A judge later overturned that voter referendum, and the Whitman land is now zoned C-2 for commercial use.

Whitman said he will sign the agreement with Ford Motor Company to give his franchise back to the auto company at the end of April. The car dealership has been in the Whitman family since 1950.

"It's like losing family member- we've had a death in the family. And that's our level of or hopelessness in Bedford. We think it's completely hopeless, because of the dishonesty," said Whitman.

Bedford Township Supervisor Walt Wilburn said he was surprised to hear Whitman Ford was closing. He called the dealership an anchor in the community, and said it is a loss.

"I don't know if zoning has anything to do with it. Car sales may be down," said Wilburn.

He added, no one was out to get the Whitman family. "I have nothing against Mr. Whitman, never did. The township, we try to go with what our master plan dictates what to do. And that is put together by the citizens of Bedford Township. As far as being fair? I don't think anybody is being unfair," said Wilburn.

Whitman said about 35 employees will lose their jobs at the end of the month. "It's a terrible day. Some of these people have worked for us, 20, 30 years... You tell them at the end of the month, we're going to be done. That's a hard thing, That's a hard thing," said Whitman.

Whitman said he still wants to sell the property, although no one has contacted him about buying the land. He is requesting it be rezoned again, to a C-3 property. It is the least restrictive form of zoning for retail development. Whitman said he wants the land zoned C-3 to market the property to potential buyers. The Bedford Township Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on the request at 7:00 p.m. April 27.