

► **To the point**

The shut-down of Whitman Ford will end a 60-year business but might not bring to an end a long history of conflicts over development at the site.

Dealership closing a blow to Bedford

The owner of Whitman Ford in Temperance last week told his employees the business would be shut down on April 29.

No matter how one views the long history of squabbling over zoning at the site, it will be a sad day for Bedford Township when the dealership closes.

Losing any business is a blow for tight-knit communities. This closure is made even more difficult because the firm has been in business for six decades.

The Whitman family also has played a vital role in the growth of the township over the years. The family donated land for Monroe County Community College's Whitman Center. Donations also were given to help construct the Francis Family YMCA, and it has been involved in community philanthropy in other ways.

The closure, though, marks a bitter end as the family pulls out of the business. About 35 employees will lose their jobs. Thousands of people who traditionally bought cars or used the service department now will have to head elsewhere.

Walt Wilburn, Bedford Township supervisor, acknowledged the impact the loss will have on the township. He expressed his sorrow for those who will lose their jobs.

The property and its future have been hot-button issues for more than a decade. Rumors have floated around for years that a "big box store," such as Walmart, has plans to move into the property at Lewis Ave. and

Sterns Rd.

The announced closing of the dealership now has fueled further speculation. The township did receive rezoning paperwork that requests changing about 19 acres of the land from C-2 commercial to C-3 commercial, which is the least restrictive and highest density commercial land use allowed within the township. The public hearing on the matter will take place next week.

In January, Mr. Whitman won a lawsuit against the township over zoning issues when Monroe County Circuit Court Judge Joseph A. Costello Jr. ruled the township's zoning of Mr. Whitman's property was "arbitrary and capricious." The ruling nullified a citizen referendum against commercial zoning for parts of the property.

If Mr. Whitman does have a buyer in the mix, it could bring jobs to the community, which has seen little business growth in the last three years.

However, because of two lawsuits and what Mr. Whitman has said are "threats and boycotts" against his business, he is leaving the community.

In a difficult economy, it is hard to stomach the loss of jobs, especially from a family-run business that has been around for decades. Let's hope that the future of the property, which will probably remain contentious for a while at least, ultimately will bring promise and development to an area that has seen little change in recent years.