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'We Are Moving To Dallas'

After Weeks Of Denying Rumors. Blockbuster Tells Workers News

November 2, 1996 | By DAMDALTANER Business Writer and Business Writers Patricia Horn and Ellen Forman contributed to this report.

Blockbuster Entertainment Chairman Bill Fields was speaking to more than 250 [employees](#) at the Museum of Art's theater on Friday when he came to the words, "We are moving to Dallas."

He was met with dead silence. Finally, a single [employee](#) clapped. Once. Everybody laughed.

The tension was broken, and an announcement that was expected - and dreaded - for nearly a month was finally brought into the open.

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Headquarters

It may have been South Florida's worst-kept secret since Jimmy Johnson was hired to replace Don Shula as coach of the Dolphins. The company that has been the bedrock of South Florida's charities and community groups and which helped remake downtown Fort Lauderdale in the 1990s, is leaving for Dallas, starting in March.

"They have a growth plan that is highly ambitious, and to make this work they have to be in the center of America," spokeswoman Cheri Fein said. The company plans to open a giant warehouse in Dallas so it can cut out a middleman and distribute products to its own stores.

The announcement fueled speculation over who will take over Blockbuster's old headquarters space, but it was almost anticlimactic to Blockbuster employees. They have heard a string of company denials amid ongoing news reports of a planned move.

"It was almost like old news," an employee said. "We just wanted to know about the [severance or relocation] packages."

Another said he felt a sense of relief because, "now we can pretty much plan our lives."

All 1,000 headquarters employees are being offered jobs at the new headquarters, Blockbuster said. Not included are the about 2,000 workers at South Florida's 75 Blockbuster [Video](#) and Music stores, plus 16 workers at a regional headquarters in Deerfield Beach.

South Florida loses a company that spends millions a year on local charity and community events, a draw that helps lure other companies to the region, and a corporate logo recognized by an estimated 90 percent of the U.S. public.

Fort Lauderdale will have to watch from a distance the company's efforts to diversify away from renting

videos, and to create a new retail chain that would try to make its parent, Viacom, a [challenger](#) to Disney Stores and Warner Brothers.

Blockbuster did not give details on Friday of relocation packages for employees.

But one employee said salaried employees were at least offered full costs of moving, plus two free trips to Dallas if they owned a home in South Florida. Hourly employees were offered \$2,000 toward moving expenses. Low-level employees who don't want to move are eligible for two weeks of salary for each year of service, the employee said.

"The real shame of it is, they're going to lose some good employees," said Jack Smith, chief executive of Sports Authority, a Lauderdale Lakes-based sporting-goods chain. "People aren't going [to Dallas]. We're already interviewing some people."

After weeks of denying that it was moving to Dallas, Blockbuster was still trying to keep a lid on information. On Friday morning, Wackenhut [security](#) guards barred non-Blockbuster employees from entering Blockbuster Plaza and the adjoining Museum of Art, where employees met with Fields.

The company still denies that it has signed a contract to lease space in the Renaissance Tower in downtown Dallas, as was reported in Dallas papers.

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But Blockbuster's scheduled departure has sent rumors flying about who will buy or lease its downtown office building.

Rumors include former Blockbuster chairman H. Wayne Huizenga, Sports Authority and Florida Atlantic University. Huizenga is said to want it to house his new companies, Sports Authority to move into downtown office space and FAU instead of constructing its own building with Broward Community College and the Stiles Corp.

Carla Coleman, an FAU vice president, said the university has no plans to adjust its current proposal, but said that doesn't mean the partners wouldn't consider the Blockbuster building.

A Huizenga spokesman said Huizenga is not interested in the building.

And Sports Authority said it has no immediate plans. Chief Executive Smith said that although his company is running out of space at its Lauderdale Lakes headquarters, it hasn't looked at the Blockbuster building.

"I can tell you we're not moving to Texas," he joked.

[Business](#) Writers Patricia Horn and Ellen Forman contributed to this report.

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