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Arbitrator returns Chrysler franchise to Clearwater dealer

By [MICHAEL SASSO](#) | The Tampa Tribune

After a year-long fight, a Clearwater Chrysler dealer stripped of his franchise in the automaker's bankruptcy has won it back.

A year ago, Jack Fitzgerald lost his right to sell new Chrysler and Jeep vehicles at his dealership, Fitzgerald's Countryside, 27365 U.S. 19 N. It was a target of then-bankrupt Chrysler's plan to eliminate 789 dealerships and give remaining dealers more share of their local markets.

However, Fitzgerald didn't back down. With a few other prominent dealers, he created the Committee to Restore Dealer Rights, an advocacy group to represent dealers nixed by Chrysler and General Motors. He also lobbied successfully to create an appeals process for dealers to win back dealerships through arbitration.

Last month, Fitzgerald's Countryside got its hearing before an arbitrator, and in recent weeks Fitzgerald learned he won his case, said John Forehand, Fitzgerald's Tallahassee-based lawyer. An arbitrator's decision is binding in court, Forehand said.

Fitzgerald couldn't immediately be reached for comment Monday to determine his plans. However, Forehand said the hope is to reopen the Chrysler and Jeep dealerships shortly. The Clearwater dealership also has Hyundai, Subaru and Suzuki franchises, which weren't affected by Chrysler's bankruptcy.

Forehand said Fitzgerald was able to convince the arbitrator that keeping the Chrysler-Jeep dealership open was better for local consumers. Fitzgerald enlisted some of his customers and a consumer advocate to speak on his behalf at the arbitration hearing, Forehand said.

Fitzgerald owns several other dealerships caught up in the Chrysler bankruptcy in Maryland, and he is trying to appeal those terminations as well.

Besides Fitzgerald, at least one other local Chrysler dealer is trying to win back his new car franchise, St. Pete Jeep Chrysler, Forehand said. William Douglas, the owner of that dealership, could not be reached for comment Monday.