

Heights Market to close

Heights Market in Watsonville is going out of business this week after more than a half-century of operation, owner Jerry Brady said this morning.

"It's just a really difficult time for all independents," said Brady, who bought the store at 1006 Freedom Boulevard two years ago.

Brady said the store will close for inventory tomorrow and re-open Thursday to sell the remaining inventory at reduced prices.

Brady said he was aware when he bought the store that he wouldn't have an easy time.

"I felt I could increase sales," he said.

But, Brady said, he was unable to meet ever-increasing competition from the chains or to erase what he said was a reputation of being high-priced.

"I think the store had an image of being expensive," Brady said. Even when he lowered prices, "it was difficult to change that image," he said.

The competition from the large chains is much greater than it was even a decade ago, said Brady, who spent 18 years with Alpha Beta before buying Heights.

Brady said he had a loyal following of customers, but when he stopped allowing charge accounts last month, the loyal customers went away.

Cutting off the charge accounts was "a gamble," Brady said. The store could no longer afford to carry them, Brady said, who was hoping the longtime customers would continue coming even without the charge accounts.

When they didn't, Brady made the decision to close the store.

Brady wouldn't comment on the future of the building. Carol Brandon, who owns the building, couldn't be reached for comment.

Heights Market was opened more than 50 years ago and for most of that time was owned and operated, first by Wesley J. (Jim) Gonterman, then by Gonterman in partnership with his son-in-law, Bill Brandon. When Gonterman retired, Bill and Carol Brandon took over operation of the store.

In 1981, Bill Brandon was shot to death by a disgruntled patron, George Christian Jones, who was later found not guilty by reason of insanity, a decision that angered many in the community. Jones was subsequently released from a mental hospital and is now a free man.

Mrs. Brandon ran the store after her husband's death until selling it in 1984 to Doug Vadnais. Vadnais sold it to Brady in 1987.