

END OF AN ERA

Capitola Book Café to close

Business to end after 34 years

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CAPITOLA — The end has come for the Capitola Book Café.

The 34-year-old Mid-County bookstore announced Tuesday that it was closing its doors permanently at the end of February, after several years of declining revenues.

"We're just spent, in every sense of the word," said the Book Café's co-owner Wendy Mayer-Lochtefeld. "We really, really tried. We threw everything against the wall. But we were never able to find a permanent, game-changing solution. We were only able to find Band-Aids that bought us a bit more time."

Last June, the popular bookstore initiated a nonprofit model called Survive & Thrive, making public its ongoing struggle to compete in an environment that has been hard on all traditional "brick and mortar" booksellers. The Book Café slashed salaries, reduced hours, brought in nonbook items to sell and other cost-cutting measures. The Book Café's landlord, Ow Family Properties, worked with the staff to find a sustainable model to keep the busi-

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JAMES TENSUAN/SENTINEL FILE

Capitola Book Café co-owner Melinda Powers, right, exalts with Tish Wolf as they check the store's Facebook page. Though the store did everything it could to keep the doors open, it will close at the end of the month.

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ness open. Mayer-Lochtefeld said that, in the end, nothing worked.

"The irony for (co-owner) Melinda (Powers) and me," she said, "is that, because of these struggles, we're better operators than we've ever been. We're leaner and meaner. We understand the business better. But we can't escape the debts and the losses we incurred when times were tough."

The current ownership group took the reins of the Book Café in 2007, just a year before the near collapse of the economy. Even without the recession, the book business in the past decade has undergone a well-publicized and painful period of turbulence, brought on by online

innovations such as the e-book and Amazon.com.

"A lot of people have said to me that it must have e-books or the Kindle," said Mayer-Lochtefeld. "It really didn't come to that. Independent bookstores could have competed, I think, if it was just that. It really came down to Amazon having the most brutal business model in the world, which is to sell products at a loss for 20 years until customers just fell away. You can't stand up against that."

In its heyday, the Book Café was not just an inviting place to buy a book and a coffee. Much like its independent competitor Bookshop Santa Cruz, the Capitola Book Café held live events featuring authors talking about their work and signing books. During the course of its 30-plus-year history, the Book Café

has both nurtured Monterey Bay writers and authors, and hosted some of the biggest names in late 20th century literature.

The large, general interest bookstore has been a stable business going back to the invention of the printing press. But, with the rise of Internet bookselling, that model, said Mayer-Lochtefeld, became unsustainable.

"New bookstores are opening all over the place," she said. "But if you look at them, you'll notice that they're very small — less than 2,000 square feet usually — or they're in an impeccable walk-up location, or they've learned to specialize. These days, you've got to give people a reason to get in their cars to come visit you. And if you have the check boxes of what it takes to make these days, we just

didn't have them. We're a warm, wonderful, welcoming old-model bookstore, but we are in the bad-luck position of not having a lot of qualities of the new sustainable business in bookselling."

Tuesday, the Capitola Book Café welcomed a handful of donors and others for a private function. Mayer-Lochtefeld said that there has been some talk of a bigger public event before the business closes at the end of the month, but nothing has been planned yet. The bookstore is focused on liquidating current inventory.

"The best thing the community can do right now is to come to the bookstore like they have in our best days and walk away with an armful of books," she said.

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