

CITY LIGHTS

BY MATTHEW BUDMAN

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Gamble

Bob Andersen arrives at his bookstore at 10:15, flips the door's Closed sign to Open, and apologizes for being a quarter hour late.

He looks resigned. The store, Books Abound, is on the brink of going under, and the excitement of a new business day is long gone.

"We're waiting to see if we can make next month's rent," Andersen says. "If we can't we'll have to give our 30 days' notice, and that'll be it."

Books Abound is a pleasant little shop with a decent selection, Chico's lowest prices, and a terrible location on Mangrove Avenue.

Three weeks ago the city demanded the store take down the large cloth sign in front—not that it matters. For two years people have driven by without seeing the sign anyway.

"Some days we don't get 10 people through the door," Andersen says. "We've never had a consistent streak of break-even days, and with the new competition that's not really feasible. We can't afford to move."

Two new, better-located bookstores moved into town this spring, prompting Andersen and his two partners to reevaluate their status.

"This was just sort of a gamble that hasn't really paid off so far," he says. "We gave it our best shot, and we're still hoping."

"Chico is not very great for small creative efforts."

A great deal of attention has been paid to the store's atmosphere, with soft New Age music and careful categorization. "Originally this was going to be a low-cost experiment," he says, sweeping an arm at the walls, "but my

partners kind of went nuts with the decorations.

"We thought Chico would like an old-fashioned kind of bookstore that was nice to be in."

Location hasn't been the store's only problem. "People have become way too choosy," Andersen says. "They only want what's on the best-seller list when it's on the best-seller list." He says he received five calls a day about *Codependent No More*, but a finally-acquired copy sat on the shelf for three months.

"No one seems to like reading enough to chance 50 cents on something they might enjoy."

Andersen has not been able to afford advertising since December.

He tried running two-for-one coupons in one newspaper but got few responses. To entice even those people back in the store, he offered them 10 percent off their next purchases.

"Not a single person came back," he says. "I still have that list of names."

Most people who come into Books Abound have already been to Chico's other stores and are looking for a single, scarce book. When Andersen says he doesn't have it either, "they turn on their heel and walk right out."

The most insidious rumor Andersen has heard is that the city's "conservative faction" has been boycotting Books Abound because the store advertised in alternative magazine *On the Verge*.

Housing rents continue to increase and no one wants to rent to a dog owner, says Andersen, 31. He'll keep living in Chico if he can somehow afford it.

"I've pretty much put everything into this store, so when it goes under I pretty much will, too."

At 10:35 an elderly man comes in, peruses a shelf and walks to the counter holding two novels, which total \$4.80 with the store's current 20 percent discount. "You need to do more advertising," he tells Andersen. "You have the best selection of paperbacks of anybody."

Andersen looks up, rueful. "I know."

