

It's About Books

by Jan Beautz

Much of the recent "debate" surrounding the upcoming ballot measure to provide additional funding for local libraries has revolved around topics other than the fate of our libraries. However, I hope you will not be misled, Measure L is not about personalities or political posturing. It is about creating a viable public library system for the residents of our community.

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Underlying this discussion is the current fiscal crisis gripping our state, a crisis that is quite real especially when measured by its impact on public services like the library systems. No longer can we explain the lack of available monies for basic

services by blaming a sluggish economy. We must face the facts that there are fundamental shifts in service demands by many of our state residents as illustrated in the accompanying chart.

As long as a larger percent-

age of our state's residents claim federally mandated services, and as long as federal lawmakers demand that state governments provide the mandated services without providing relief, more and more of local tax dollars will be shifted to fund state programs affecting the types of benefits once afforded through local property taxes.

In our own county and cities, the shift of local dollars to the state has impacted many programs. Two years ago our coun-

ty was able to retain about 25 cents of every property tax dollar to provide local services. Now, we work with only about 12 cents of every property tax dollar, even though we are required to provide additional programs and services. Under the current budget, only about 10 percent of the county's general fund spending is considered discretionary.

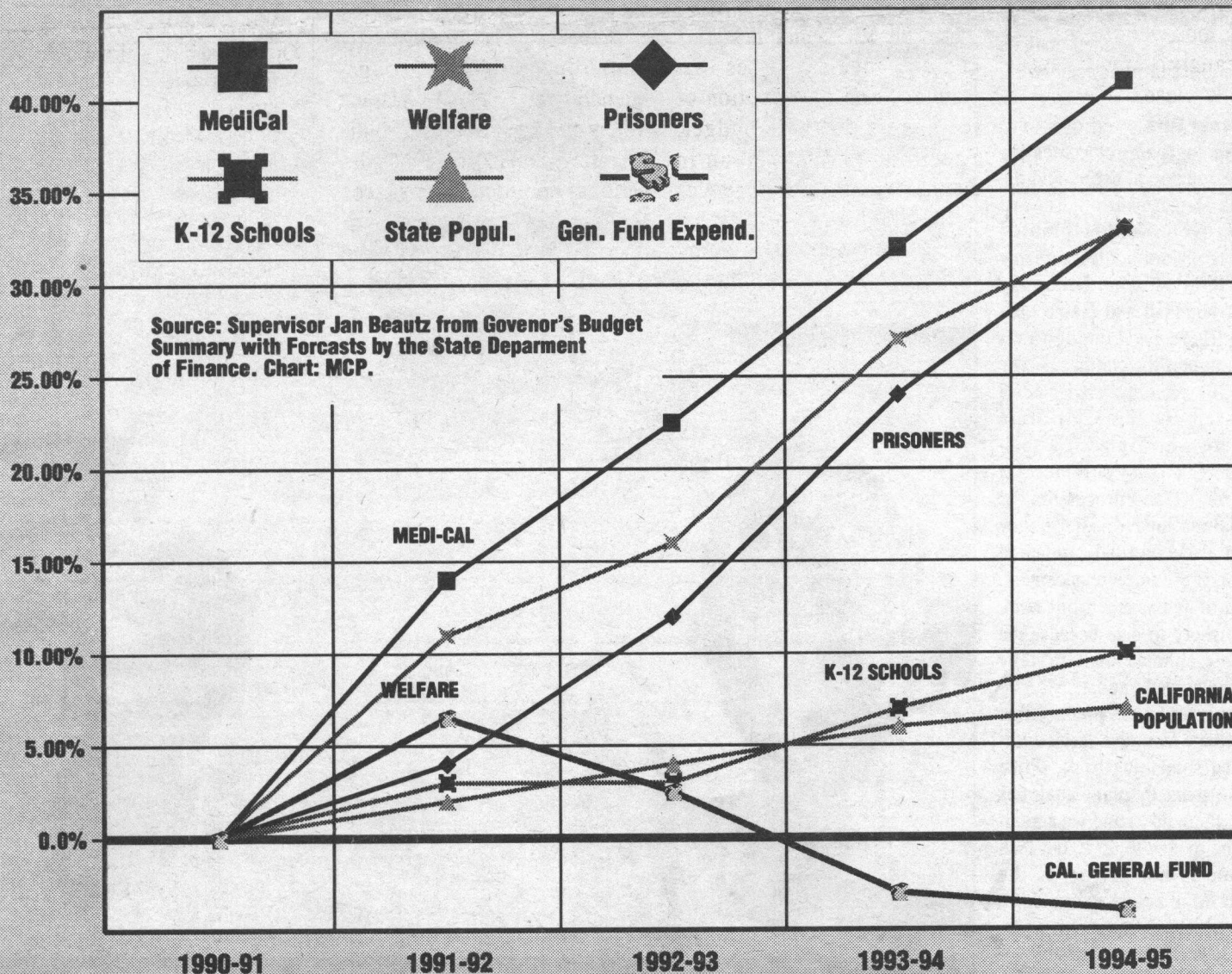
Of the spending that has been most impacted, the library program has been hard hit, in part because it relied on funding sources that were shifted to the state and in part because of total funding reductions from the state. The state's general fund, in rapid decline, now only contributes about 18 percent of the amount called for in the Public Library Fund legislation passed in 1982, leaving the balance to be picked up by local governments. This year's state spending for libraries is only 24 cents per person.

Therefore, if libraries are to be a locally funded service, there must be a reliable and regular source of funds.

The Santa Cruz County Library Oversight Committee, working with a group of concerned citizens, spent many months discussing how to deal with an underfunded, inadequate library system that is being used by more and more people, and is being asked to fill ever increasing demands. It wasn't hard to see more funds were needed, but this did present difficult choices.

A sales tax, rather than a parcel tax, was endorsed because the poll that was done showed that a sales tax was preferred by those polled. It also seemed equitable for everyone in the community to contribute to

State Programs Growth by Percentage Increases in Program Populations Compared to General Fund Growth/Decline



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libraries, not just property owners.

In deciding exactly how the measure should be drafted, a general tax, rather than a special tax, was chosen because, besides from the obvious fact that the general tax only requires a 50 percent vote instead of a two-thirds vote to pass, it seemed appropriate that with something as important as library services a majority rather than a minority of voters should make this decision.

This brings us to the question of whether or not supporting public libraries is an important responsibility of local government.

While libraries will certainly continue to be funded at some level, should voters decide not to approve a small extension of the existing sales tax, Measure L offers a clear choice to voters wanting an adequately funded library system that offers more than just the most basic services at only a few locations.

Measure L would update the book budget, restore and increase the hours facilities are kept open, and provide funding for operating new branches in Live Oak, Scotts Valley, Capitola and North Watsonville.

Measure L would allow libraries to continue to provide safe havens for many children and places to go after school to do homework and read, expanding the neighborhood facilities available to kids near existing school campuses.

Measure L would assure that activities (like story hours or book clubs) could continue and increase, along with music and video events and information services via computerized networks.

And, Measure L would allow city and county officials to use monies set aside to construct needed new library facilities by guaranteeing there will be ongoing funding to support the opening of additional branches to serve county residents.

I believe, in total, Measure L will provide our citizens with a truly improved library system.

And, Measure L does not

increase current levels of taxation, but extends a portion of the present one-half cent sales tax that was approved by the voters for earthquake repair which is set to expire in March of 1997.

Measure L is supported by numerous citizen groups, including the League of Women Voters and Friends of the Public Libraries and leaders in the educational community. Eighteen thousand people signed petitions last year, over a very short period of time, supporting library services.

While opponents of this library funding plan say you can't trust elected officials to administer a general use tax to benefit library services, I have to say I find their arguments without support.

Both the county and cities are currently proposing to use capital funds to construct new libraries. These are funds that could be used for other capital (building) improvements.

Why would the county and cities decide to use capital funds for libraries, and then divert operating monies for other purposes causing newly built libraries to close? Why would city and county elected officials cause the indignation of the public by diverting funds for libraries to other purposes? Why would any politician act in direct opposition to the stated convictions of the majority of their constituents?

The answer to each of these questions is that we wouldn't. Whether you believe your elected officials ethical or just politically astute, you can count on the promise to use the funds as stated.

A very specific list of how this money will be used has been put forth by the Library Oversight Committee. This is the same procedure that was used in the Measure E earthquake funding, and a recent audit has shown that the money was spent on earthquake projects as promised.

Proposition 172 has also been a reoccurring theme of Measure L opponents. I think it

is important to remember how Proposition 172 came about.

When the statewide initiative Proposition 172 was proposed last year, there was concern that the amount of property taxes to be shifted in 1993 was going to

leave counties so short of funds that public safety would be threatened. Public safety was a concern because most counties, ours included, had not made major cuts to the law enforcement budgets, but had attempted to deal with ever-decreasing funds by cutting other General Fund departments.

Indeed, the independent legislative analyst specifically stated in the brochure that went to all voters: "The additional sales tax revenues resulting from this measure are intended to offset part of the \$2.3 billion in county and city revenue losses that resulted from the adoption of the state's 1993-94 budget. Specifically, \$2.3 billion in annual property tax revenues were shifted from counties and cities to the schools, thereby reducing the state's funding

obligations to public schools."

The reason the analyst wrote that this offset "part of the \$2.3 billion" is that Proposition 172 raised considerably less than the property taxes that it was supposed to replace. This meant that departments not related to law enforcement had to accept additional cuts if law enforcement budgets stayed whole.

I would also like to note that in our county we have expanded law enforcement services this year. There are six more deputy sheriff positions fully funded. New positions have been added to the staff at Juvenile Hall. Other positions have been added to augment public safety. Further, contrary to the statements of Measure L opponents, NO Proposition 172 money has gone to the Public Defenders' office.

I support Measure L, but I am not alone in supporting public libraries.

Measure L is endorsed by our state senator Henry Mello and state Assemblyman Bruce McPherson. Measure L has been approved by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors and all of the city councils in the county.

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Much of local decision making revolves around quality of life issues. These concerns require choices.

A library is a gathering place for all ages, a reflection of the community spirit we are all concerned about losing.

I hope you will choose to vote YES on Measure L in November. □

[Editor's Note: Jan Beutz is a member of the Santa Cruz County Library Oversight Committee. Jan Beutz also serves as a elected representative for the First District on the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.]

OPEN FORUM

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How State Leaders Have Balanced Their Budgets

Source: County Supervisor Jan Beutz from State Legislative Analyst's Office

