

Writing Is On The Wall For Five Branch Libraries To Close

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Sentinel Staff Writer

The county administrative office's proposal Thursday to close the Ben Lomond, Garfield Park, Capitola, Soquel and Freedom branch libraries is based upon grim fiscal realities which appear to necessitate sacrificing weaker components of the city-county library system so that basic library service may continue to be made available to city and county patrons.

That assessment of the proposal that was presented to the Library Board was given to The Sentinel this morning by Librarian Charles Atkins.

"People must understand that the county is making a major decision," Atkins said. "A decision to close libraries is difficult to support and I am not saying that I am supporting the closings."

"But I do concur that the county has major fiscal problems and I do concur that they must cut their budget. The fiscal problems appear to me to be a very valid reason for cutting back services."

"But I want to stress that if this recommendation on the closures from the County Administrative Office is approved by both the county Board of Supervisors and the Santa Cruz City Council, we will still be providing an excellent library service despite economic constraints. The people of this county will still have an outstanding library in Watsonville, a very fine library at Aptos, another fine library at Branciforte, an excellent central library that already gets well over 50 percent of its patrons from non-city areas. In the north county there will still be branches at Boulder Creek, Felton and Scotts Valley. The Bookmobile service would be expanded."

"In other words, we are still going to have an excellent library system, and in many respects the system may end up stronger than it is right now."

"By that I mean we are now stretched too thin because of revenue losses under Proposition 13. We have to stretch a book budget over many branches, our systemwide staffing is too meager."

"I know that every community, no matter how small, wants its library, and as a professional librarian I am glad that libraries are appreciated. But Proposition 13 was passed, there is inflation and other economic constraints, and adjustments do have to be made."

Atkins said that although the proposed branch closures would inconvenience some people and perhaps even jar the parochial pride of others, the fact is the effects of the closures would be less horrible than they sound.

The total annual circulation of the five branches proposed to be closed represents only 7.06 percent of the total county circulation: Atkins said.

For purposes of comparison, the Aptos branch, which would remain open, has 21.66 percent of county circulation, Scotts Valley, which also would remain open, has 6.69 percent.

Atkins said the county proposal includes virtually the same library branches the city closed for a time immediately after Proposition 13 was passed in 1978.

"We closed LaSelva Beach, and this time they are recommending Capitola. We also closed the Bookmobile, which they think should stay in service. But it is essentially the same proposal and for the same reason: financial cutbacks require service cutbacks."

The LaSelva Beach branch may close also. The county would pay some costs but insists it be staffed by volunteers and this may require the branch to be dropped out of the library system, Atkins indicated.

Atkins stressed the county cutback in financing is severe in terms of percentages.

"The county has a shortfall of about \$127,000 and this means a 35 percent decrease in county funding for the last five months of this fiscal year. This is a massive cut because there is no way to absorb it over so short a time. So the closures are recommended."

"But people must remember that if the county-city funding agreement were broken, then people outside the city of Santa Cruz could not use the Santa Cruz Main Library, which is the heart and soul of the system because it provides basic core library services. The only solution for the county appears to be to cut the services and request the other closures."

Proposals that volunteers be used perhaps in Ben Lomond and elsewhere to keep the branches open would run into problems, Atkins said. The city has a policy that volunteers may not be used to supplant regular employees, and the county cutback proposal will cost 6½ jobs. There are presently four vacancies that will not be filled, and the library currently has 14 fewer positions than it had two years ago. Insurance problems also would result from use of unsupervised volunteers at the branches.

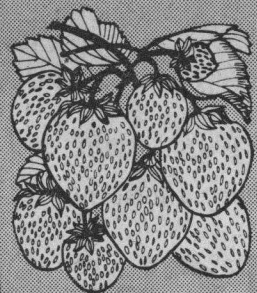
Atkins said he would have no objections, on the other hand, if the county turned over the Porter Sesnon library building in Soquel and the Ben Lomond library building in Ben Lomond to people who want to provide their own book collections and operate the buildings on their own.

But these would be out of the library system, he emphasized; and, clearly, the library system would not provide books or other services.

The Library Board will consider the county proposal Monday and the Board of Supervisors will get it Tuesday. If the supervisors approve the proposal, it will go to the Santa Cruz City Council for decision.

Under the funding agreement with the county, it is the city of Santa Cruz that manages the library system.

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