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Santa Cruz County

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Library funding woes return

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SANTA CRUZ — Library funding is the subject of at least two bills being considered by state legislators.

Both bills will be discussed at a Monday night meeting of the Library Oversight Committee. The group also will look at changes to its long-range expansion plans.

State Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, has introduced a bill similar to one he wrote last year that kept the local library system open. Mello's bill allowed county supervisors to give the library nearly \$1 million that would have gone to some local water and sewer districts. Without the money, library officials said they would have had to close nine of the system's 10 branches. The bill expires in July, however, and Mello is asking for a more permanent solution.

Mello's bill would let local supervi-

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sors again decide how to divvy up the money, which goes to a variety of special districts.

The most common type of special districts are water and sewer districts, but other public entities on the list include the local port district and a cemetery district near Watsonville.

"Let's let these decisions be made at the local level rather than in Sacramento," Mello said. "Let's give this power back to local boards of supervisors who know the needs of their communities

best."

Water and sewer officials protested last year over the loss of funds they'd come to rely on, saying they would have to raise rates and effectively subsidize library services for the rest of the county.

Live Oak Supervisor Jan Beautz disagrees.

"I think it was fair last time, but I know some people didn't agree," said Beautz, who sits on the oversight committee. "... If we're going to subsidize

one water district, why not subsidize all of them?"

Also in the legislative hopper is a bill that would let local areas form library service assessment districts to raise money. The bill is the work of state Sen. David Roberti and the state Library Association. Roberti wrote a similar bill last year, but it did not pass the Legislature.

This year's version gives better protection to property owners, according to library staff. It requires that voters approve any such assessment districts. Last year's bill was opposed by Gov. Pete Wilson because it allowed local officials to set up the districts without voter approval.

Library officials have recommended that the Library Oversight Committee endorse both bills.

The Library Oversight Committee meets at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Central Branch Community Meeting Room, 224 Church Street, Santa Cruz.