Library plan incites public outrage

By JOHN BESSA 7-27-93
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Library patrons delivered overwhelming opposition Monday to a plan before the library oversight committee that would close nine of 10 branches to deal with a $1.8 million bite from the system's budget.

"I think the people in charge should re-order our priorities because nothing is as important as the library system," said William Codiga, one of 46 speakers during the 2½-hour meeting.

More than 700 people packed the main floor of the central library branch to share with the oversight committee their anger at what was called the "theft" of $1.2 million, plus $600,000 in city matching funds, from county tax money to close the state budget deficit.

The state Legislature could reverse its action, but everyone at Monday night's meeting assumed it would not.

Speakers also called on local officials to do something to keep all library branches open at least one day a week.

"We know it was not the board of supervisors' problem. They didn't cause the problem ... but they are the only ones who can solve it at this time," Brad Brereton told the committee.

The oversight committee, consisting of county, city and citizen representatives, responded with three motions to advise the county Board of Supervisors, which doles out two-thirds of the library's total funds, to:

● Find a way to block the transfer of tax money from the county to the state in December so it will be used for the library system and not go into the state's coffers.

● Provide money to keep all branches open until a permanent fix is found.

● Ask that the governor re-convene the Legislature for the sole purpose of restoring the money shifted from the special district that pays for libraries.

The cuts will equal about 47 percent of the library system's total $4.1 million budget when matching funds from the city are counted. They call for much more than a small reduction in hours to cut costs, as in June, when library officials had to close a $179,000 gap, said Anne Turner, director of libraries.

Some of the recommendations were bred out of the community's comments to the committee.

Some suggested fees be charged for library cards, or that a donation be requested.

"I would be happy to donate $25 per card holder in my family," said Linda Bookout, a self-described avid reader. "I intend to make such a contribution."

Others suggested an increase in property taxes. Or sending an IOU to Sacramento instead of tax money.

One man suggested everyone turn in their videos and books late and rack up big overdue fines.

Another mentioned that, in Europe, a per-book fee is charged to help keep the libraries running.

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"They have kings in some of the countries in Europe," said Dave Woods, a library user.

No one embraced the plan to close nine branch libraries.

If they do close, "we're conducting a lobotomy on the communities," said Anne Gulliver, a Boulder Creek resident.

And once they're gone, the money needed for multiple branches will be spent elsewhere, Woods said.

"If we lose ... all those branches it is going to be very hard to get them back," he said.

Closures would cripple the learning of people in areas far from the one remaining branch, in downtown Santa Cruz.

"We're a center for the home schooling families and that's a large group in the San Lorenzo Valley," Gulliver said of the Boulder Creek branch.

Committee members joined the public speakers in condemning the state's action.

"This was done on the last day of budget hearings in the state capital," said Jan Beautz, committee member and county supervisor.

"We need to find out what is happening in the state capital," she said. "We can't manufacture money in the basement of the county building."

The committee will reconvene in August to decide what suggestion will be made to the Board of Supervisors on the issue of closing branches.

What remains is if the board will take the advice offered by the oversight committee and what the board will do with it.