

And the jury looks at library system

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By BOB SMITH

The Santa Cruz County Grand Jury is recommending closure of one small branch library in Ben Lomond.

And it is also calling for renewed negotiations between the city of Santa Cruz and the Board of Supervisors on the operational agreements for the entire city-county library system.

But the Grand Jury discounted allegations made to it that branch librarians were being intimidated by Library Director Charles Atkins.

Although the Grand Jury echoed the call by Supervisors Chairman Dan Forbus for renewed negotiations on the city-county library agreement, Santa Cruz Councilman Larry Edler questioned how far the city council can go in modifying the present administrative control of the libraries without getting voter approval of a Santa Cruz city charter change.

Edler was also surprised at the mildness of the Grand Jury's report on the library controversy that has been simmering for the last few years.

"They didn't say a hell of a lot," he added. "They really backed off."

The Grand Jury recommended "that the Board of Supervisors, the (Santa Cruz) city attorney and the Library Board of Trustees work together to produce a clear and definitive correlation of the City Charter's Library provisions with the City-County Library Agreement in order to resolve the present areas of conflict and disagreement."

"How can you compromise," said Edler, who, with Councilman Michael Rotkin, met recently with Forbus and Supervisor Pat Liberty on the library disagreement, "unless you have a charter election."

Edler was also surprised that the Grand Jury excluded the City Council from the list of negotiators.

"The Grand Jury articulated very well that there is a disagreement," added Edler.

"But when you try to define the disagreement, you come up against a stone wall. The Board (of Supervisors) is unhappy, but when you ask 'what are you unhappy about?' they can't say."

"We'd like to know what they are upset about and what they want to do about it," concluded Edler.

In its report, the Grand Jury said it has received "citizen complaints" that there was a "great deal" of intimidation of the branch librarians by the Chief Administrator (Atkins), "that none of the branch librarians had any rapport with the Main Library, and that they walked in fear of losing their jobs if they made any requests for books or other library services."

After interviewing each of the branch librarians, the Grand Jury reported: "Each denied the idea of any possible intimidation. All spoke of the good rapport they had with the personnel of the Main Library.

"The most serious complaint was one that was common to all, and that was the

lack of new books, especially fiction and periodicals.

"Most of them (the branch librarians) expressed the belief that the Chief Administrator was 'doing the best he could' under the present financial circumstances.

The report adds: "After further interviews with the Chief Administrator, and after studying his budget, the revised budget, the proposed budget and the revised proposed budget, the Grand Jury concluded that the Chief Administrator is doing the best he can under an impossibly restricted financial situation and commends him for his efforts.

"It is obvious that the City-County Library System cannot function efficiently and at requisite service levels under its present limited budget. In the end, one gets what one pays for. The Grand Jury recognizes the importance of a good library system to the people of our community as well as the difficulties in finding adequate funding for our libraries."

Atkins was pleased with the Grand Jury's comments.

"They felt the library was operating efficiently with money it had," he said.

"It's a vote of confidence in what we are doing," the Library Director added.

The Grand Jury called the Ben Lomond library "one of the most expensive libraries to maintain."

"In addition, Ben Lomond is surrounded by such an undesirable

neighborhood that many nearby residents have expressed reluctance, and even to fear, to go there. This may be one obvious reason for the poor attendance there. On the other hand, from an objective and cost efficiency basis, if the area residents are unable or unwilling to use their library, there is no point in keeping it open."

But the report was critical about the manner that Atkins tried to close several branch libraries, including Ben Lomond, Soquel and La Selva Beach.

"The Grand Jury felt that such a precipitate mass closing, with little or no public warning, was ill-timed and ill-advised. Schools, which had just closed for the summer vacation, almost simultaneously announced the elimination or curtailment of their unusual summer programs. These closings presented a bleak outlook for the community.

"The Grand Jury was aware that the closing of the libraries was due to the restrictions of Prop. 13, but felt that some other alternative response could have been found. This feeling was expressed in a letter to the members of the library Board of Trustees and the members of the Board of Supervisors. Just prior to receipt of the letter, and acting upon public pressure and its demands, the Board of Supervisors found sufficient extra funds for library use to re-open the branches on limited part-time service and later to restore the Bookmobile service."