

Library 1980-1989

Library Board fed up with budget problems

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1-12-88

SANTA CRUZ — Driven by frustration over a drawn-out city-county budget squabble, several members of the Santa Cruz Library Board have threatened to turn the issue over to the county grand jury for investigation.

At an emotional meeting Monday night, two guests, City Councilman Mike Rotkin and County Supervisor Robley Levy, asked the board to reconsider such an action, which they said would serve no purpose but to make negotiations more difficult.

"It's not that we're afraid of the grand jury," Rotkin said. "We've ignored them many times in the past. But (grand jury involvement) could create a level of distrust that would probably end up in court."

The library system is run jointly by the city and county, and at the root of the current budget problem is a disagreement between the two governments over how library money should be spent. The city wants to buy new books, and the county wants to build a new library in Live Oak.

The two governments drew up budgets that didn't agree in both 1985-86 and 1987-88, and have not been able to reconcile them after nearly a year of non-public negotiations.

Under an existing contract with the county, the city has the power to enforce any budget they see fit. But the city has chosen to negotiate with the county instead, because officials believe that forcing the situation will destroy the jointly-run library system.

In the meantime the county has withheld vital funds from the library, and library staff has been left

in the lurch without enough money to purchase books. Both library staff and board members feel that they are helplessly caught in the middle of a city-county power struggle.

Pent-up emotions spilled over at the Monday meeting, as some board members castigated Rotkin and Levy for not solving the problem sooner, and for keeping the negotiations secret.

"I find it reprehensible and totally frustrating that elected authorities who claim to be progressive have allowed the situation to come to this," board member Robin Brooks said. "The reading public is being held hostage."

Board members also suggested binding arbitration or mediation, but Levy and Rotkin said that such measures weren't needed unless negotiations came to an impasse.

"We're not at an impasse," said Levy. "The issue has been dealt with intensively since the first of the year."

Both Levy and Rotkin said chances were good that the negotiations will be complete within a month, though they would not reveal the substance of the talks.

In the end, the board approved a motion that urged the county to cut loose the disputed funds and negotiate any contract changes with good faith, and not cash, as an impetus. If a budget is not approved by Feb. 4, the board urged the city to enforce its contract rights and make the county pay.

The library board is an advisory board, and its resolutions are not binding upon the City Council.