

Library system bouncing back from effects of Proposition 13

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The Santa Cruz City-County Library system is beginning to recover somewhat from the effects of Prop. 13.

Less than five years ago, five small branch libraries in Santa Cruz County were closed after Prop. 13 was passed by California voters. The library system hasn't reopened any of the libraries, yet four of the five are still operating, largely thanks to volunteers.

Santa Cruz City-County Library System is funded by both city and county funds. The county funds are received in large part from the state and then distributed to various agencies. Since 1980, the library system has received county funding through the Special District Rescue Augmentation Funds which was intended as a limited measure to offset the great funding losses from Prop. 13, but casualties in the library system still happened.

—Freedom branch is run by a part-time paid staff at the Freedom Elementary School. Several volunteers work at the small branch.

—La Selva Branch, while still a part of the library system, is operated entirely by volunteers. Books and other materials are supplied by the system, but there is no paid staff.

—Capitola Branch stayed open with funding from the city of Capitola, but about 18 months later, the City Council decided to withdraw financial support, and the branch closed on Nov.

18, 1981.

—Soquel Library withdrew from the system and is operated by volunteers. It is up to volunteers to raise money to buy new books and equipment. The library is open seven days a week, and circulation is better than before the library was scheduled for closure.

—The tiny Twin Lakes branch located in a cottage on Seventh Avenue was closed.

—Bookmobile service to areas in the north and south counties was suspended.

Sara Bunnett, president of the library board when the Prop. 13 casualties occurred, is once again president of the board, now that the library system is beginning to see better days.

Bunnett, active in the League of Women Voters, said she "lobbied long and loud against Prop. 13." She was prepared for a financial blow when surplus tax money ran out, but said the impact on Santa Cruz libraries was still hard to take.

The libraries targeted for closure were chosen because of low circulation and use. While the small libraries were convenient and many had a certain hominess about them, Bunnett said they weren't full-service libraries.

Vernon Berlin, who was also on the library board at that time, said the decision to close the branches had really been made by the Board of Supervisors and the library trustees merely went through the formality of approving the closure.

"The library board doesn't have any power to tax, it's not a decision-making board. It's an advisory group. We gave it (branch closures) a rubber stamp. The decision wasn't made by us, it was by the Board of Supervisors. They said to close this one, close that one — with, no thought to what people needed."

Volunteer staff at both La Selva and Soquel libraries have said in the past that small, local libraries are as necessary as larger branches. They serve patrons, such as the elderly and young children, who might not be able to travel to use the other libraries. The fact that so many people are willing to give their time to keep those libraries open, they say, is proof of their value.

Both Berlin and Bunnett voted with other trustees at a meeting July 3, 1978 to close the branches at the end of the 1978 fiscal year.

After the libraries were closed, Bunnett said the Friends of the Santa Cruz Public Libraries, an advocacy group of volunteers, reorganized after being inactive for a few years. Bunnett said the group has been instrumental in giving the library a voice at the government level, which is especially valuable at budget time.

"The Friends gives an organized voice for libraries," she said. "That must really come from the people. If we were to go, or to send some professional, it might be suspect."

Bunnett said the system is

beginning to recover "bit by bit" from Prop. 13, but funding and services are still inadequate. She is optimistic that the system is in a growing period and said that she hopes the next expansion will be in the Mid-county.

Second District Supervisor, Robley Levy, who is the Supervisors' liaison to the library board, said while County Supervisors agree that a Midcounty library is greatly needed, the issue is money.

"Clearly, funding a Mid-county library staff is a major undertaking, it represents a major, ongoing cost," she said. "There is no question about the board's commitment, the question is always funding."

Levy, who said she lobbied the Board of Supervisors (before she was elected a supervisor) to keep La Selva Branch open, added that in her opinion, a branch library is also needed in the Corralitos area. She's hopeful proposed state legislation, SB 1220, the Keene Library Bond Act of 1985, which would finance refurbishing and new construction of libraries will be passed, which could bring much-needed construction money to Santa Cruz County Library System. But even with that help, Supervisors would still have to decide whether 'it's possible to fund new employees.

"It's hard to say finances for anything (in the public sector) is looking up," she said. "We're sharing a set amount of money between competing needs."