

Branch libraries ordered closed as economy move

Libraries 1980-1989
By BOB SMITH

Libraries in Capitola and Soquel will be among those closed next month under a plan reluctantly approved Monday morning by the Santa Cruz City-County Library Board of Trustees.

The Board voted 4-2 to close Freedom, Soquel, Capitola, and Ben Lomond libraries as a post-Prop 13 cost-cutting measure first proposed by the County Administrative Office.

Other cuts will be made in the paid staffs at the Central Library, Scotts Valley and the Bookmobile, and by manning the La Selva Beach library entirely by volunteers.

The closings will result in a \$127,000 savings to the county on an annual basis, but because the closings will not take place until February (seven months into the fiscal year), county budget analyst Luther Perry said \$63,890 will be saved by the closings this year. The remaining deficit will be made up by transferring money from the library system's capital outlay fund to the operating fund.

The proposal goes to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors for approval next Tuesday, and then to the Santa

Cruz City Council for final action Jan. 23.

Library Director Charles Atkins said the closures would probably take place within two weeks of the City Council's approval.

Bookmobile service will be provided in the areas where the libraries are being closed, Atkins said, although no schedule has been worked out yet.

Opposition Monday to the proposed closings came mainly from supporters of the Freedom and Ben Lomond Libraries.

Julia Gotthold, of the Ben Lomond Town Association, proposed that the cities of Scotts Valley and Capitola pick up the costs of operating libraries in their cities, freeing the money that will be used to keep Scotts Valley open and available to Ben Lomond residents.

Barring that possibility, she proposed that Ben Lomond withdraw from the present library service district and operate its own library.

The move to close Freedom was strongly opposed by branch librarian Betty Ellis and Freedom on Guard chairwoman Nicki Pecchenino.

Saying the Freedom library is now just beginning to "move", Mrs. Ellis told the board that there is now a large "Friends of the Freedom Library" group formed and a "Reading Is Fundamental" program has been approved.

Ms. Pecchenino called the CAO's recommendations "a drastic solution.

"In my opinion, it would not be in the best interest of any of the communities to close the libraries there."

Mrs. Pecchenino reminded the board that the Freedom library serves Salsipuedes and Corralitos, as well as Freedom.

Library Trustee Robert Blankholm asked if closing the library there would actually cost more money because of the agreement with Watsonville that the city-county system reimburse Watsonville for the cost of service to residents outside

the city of Watsonville.

Both Atkins and Perry said no, with Perry saying that \$4,000 had been allowed in his estimates for the county's increased payments to Watsonville after Freedom's closure.

Blankholm's wife, Mrs. Mona Blankholm, has been leading the fight to keep the Soquel library open and to improve service there.

She was successful last year in reversing a library board decision to close the branch. But neither she or her husband Monday questioned Perry's recommendation to close the branch this time.

The only person who spoke in support of keeping the little library open was Michael Duffy.

"Instead of closing the Soquel library," he told the trustees, "why don't you turn it into a combination museum and library with a book trade

system instead of a book checkout system?"

As presented to the library board, the county's financial picture is bleak.

"If no action is taken this fiscal year, the county will be some \$5 million short of financing next year's county general fund budget," Perry told the board in a memo given them last Thursday.

"Our office will be reporting to the Board of Supervisors at the Jan. 8 (yesterday) meeting regarding overall county finances, and we will present a plan for cutting back county operations and services beginning immediately, to reduce expenditures to meet available financing.

"The reduction plan will affect almost every department. The simple fact facing us all is that Prop. 13 has hit the county and there is simply not enough money to

continue all programs at their present levels.

"Our office," Perry said, "has met with the city staff to develop a long term library reorganization and financing plan that is consistent with projected financing. This plan . . . is based primarily on moving toward fewer but larger and more complete library branches spaced some five to 10 miles apart. It also expands the use of volunteers."

The plan calls for construction of two new library branches, one in the San Lorenzo Valley and the second in the midcounty, as funds become available.

With staffing to be drawn from the existing staffs in the central library and the extension division, "the two new branches should not appreciably increase operating costs under this plan," Perry's memo said.

"The branch reorganization will reduce operating costs by an estimated \$174,805 annually (\$63,890 in 1979-80). It is expected to result in an approximately one percent reduction in county circulation," the analyst concluded.

Blankholm called for a re-

evaluation of the board's selection of a site at 30th and Brommer Streets for a Live Oak library.

"This is not a suitable location for a midcounty library," he said, with board chairman Mrs. Sara Bunnett agreeing.

Trustee Alvin Reetz, who joined Blankholm in voting against the motion to approve the CAO's recommendations, said:

"The board should be in an advocacy role, rather than refereeing a demise. This report from the CAO should be rejected, and we should insure some improvement for a library that hasn't gotten a fair share."

Blankholm agreed, saying, "It is a crime to spend \$11 million on a criminal justice system and only \$1 million on libraries.

"This is the Golden Age of books, and there should be bigger and better libraries to take care of them," he concluded.

But the other trustees, Vernon Berlin, Mrs. Bunnett, Mrs. Eleanor Engstrand and Mrs. Mary Ann Kaplan, said they had no choice but to concur with the CAO recommendation.

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