

Against the Odds

Despite Needing A Two-Thirds Vote, Local Library Measure Wins Big

by Jim Johnson

When Library Director Anne Turner and library staff opened the doors to the Santa Cruz Main Branch library Wednesday morning, the usual crowd was waiting outside. Only this time, the crowd burst into spontaneous applause, celebrating the passage of a local tax measure aimed at funding the area's library system.

Expressing a surprising amount of support, voters not only passed Measure B, the Library Initiative, in last week's election but passed it by a substantial margin.

County voters approved a 1/4-cent sales tax to replace the 1/2-cent earthquake sales tax when it expires on March 31, 1997. Since Measure B is a dedicated tax — its proceeds will be specifically earmarked for libraries alone. And, because it is a dedicated tax, it required a two-thirds vote to pass.

When the unofficial election results were released last week, Measure B had passed with 72.3 percent of the vote, about 5.5 percentage points more than required.

Even Turner was surprised at the outcome.

"We weren't confident at all," Turner said. "We just didn't know. There were an awful lot of people who didn't think this would pass, and these were people who were knowledgeable politically. It was a tremendous affirmation for public libraries. It's obvious what we needed to do was develop a [measure] which people would agree on."

Indeed, the defeat of Measure L in 1994, another tax aimed at helping libraries, gave library staff a hint as to what local voters would be unlikely to support. Though Measure L, as a non-dedicated tax, needed only a majority vote to win, anti-tax forces lobbied hard against the measure, saying the tax should have been dedicated to libraries and expired within a defined time period.

Ironically, anti-tax crusaders may actually have helped Measure B pass with their specific criticisms of Measure L, because library supporters

addressed both concerns in drafting Measure B. In addition to being a dedicated tax, Measure B will "sunset" in 16 years.

Without their previous, specific criticisms, Measure B were left trying to convince voters that the county government already had enough money to fund the libraries. That scheme did not apparently work. Even anti-tax crusader Carolyn Busenhardt had to admit that the people had spoken clearly with their approval of Measure B.

"It does show it's possible to get the two-thirds [vote]," Busenhardt said. "We have to live with it. We may not be happy about it, but we have to live with it."

Busenhardt said she still believes voters were misled into thinking libraries couldn't survive without the new tax.

"I still think the voters were duped into thinking the government needed more money," Busenhardt said. "Obviously people believed there are not enough funds in the government to pay for basic community services. I think they're going to find out they've been duped in the long run."

County Supervisor Jan Beautz said she thought voters would be very pleased with their approval of Measure B.

"I think people will be well-served by their vote on this," Beautz said. "I think we'll have a very nice library system. We were faced with cutbacks to the whole system. This certainly guarantees there will be no more cutbacks, and they will be able to restore open hours."

Currently, supervisors are funding the library system by diverting money from a special fund. A bill by State Senator Henry Mello that expires next year allowed supervisors that power for a limited time. Without a tax measure, the libraries would have lost about \$1 million in funding a year.

Also, as part of the measure, a new team of city and county people will take over running the library.

According to Turner, the measure provides for two new governance agreements for the library system. The current five-person Library Oversight

Committee governing board will be replaced by a nine-member board, which will include representatives from the Board of Supervisors, the Santa Cruz City Council, and the city councils of Capitola and Scotts Valley. The cities of Capitola and Scotts Valley have never been represented on the library's governing board. Also, a Library Financing Authority will also be established and will have control of the library budget.

The proceeds from the tax will go toward funding Santa Cruz County library operations, including funding the on-going operations of new facilities in Live Oak and Scotts Valley, a relocated Children's Library in Live Oak, and a future library for Capitola.

However, the measure does not include funding for construction of new libraries, only specific existing branch renovation projects will be paid for out of Measure B funds. Instead, construction of new branches will be left up to others.

In Scotts Valley and Live Oak, funds have already been set aside for library construction.

According to Supervisor Beautz, the passage of Measure B was essential to building the new Live Oak library because without funding from Measure B, there would be no money to operate a new facility in Live Oak.

The Live Oak library is presently slated to be built on Capitola Road near 17th Avenue in Live Oak, and serve as a regional Mid-County branch. Beautz said that the recently purchased building on Portola Drive will be the temporary home of the Live Oak Children's library and community center until the bigger, more modern facility is constructed. People in Capitola will have to wait until their city government can afford to build its own library.

Turner said even though money from the tax won't be available until July of next year, library administrators will begin making plans.

"We're going to start to work out ways we can hire new people so we can restore open hours right [away]," Turner said. □