

Library system recovering from chaos

Shaking off effects of Prop. 13

By CANDACE ATKINS
STAFF WRITER

With a new Boulder Creek Library, plans in motion for a Midcounty branch and automation of the entire system, it's hard to remember the chaos Prop. 13 funding caused the Santa Cruz City-County Library System.

But less than five years ago, five small branch libraries 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.

Ben Lomond, Twin Lakes, Soquel, La Selva Beach, Freedom and Garfield Park branches were scheduled to be shut down when library directors were forced to cut \$120,000 from the 1979-80 budget. Capitola branch missed the first cut, but was later closed because of Prop. 13.

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 band-aid to offset the great funding losses from Prop. 13, but casualties in the library system still happened.

—Garfield Park was spared when people from the neighborhood convinced Santa Cruz City Council to fund the small branch. It's still operating on that basis, with no support from the county.

—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.

—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.

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

small branch.

—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.

—Ben Lomond branch is no longer a part of the system, either, and is open several hours a week, thanks to volunteers.

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

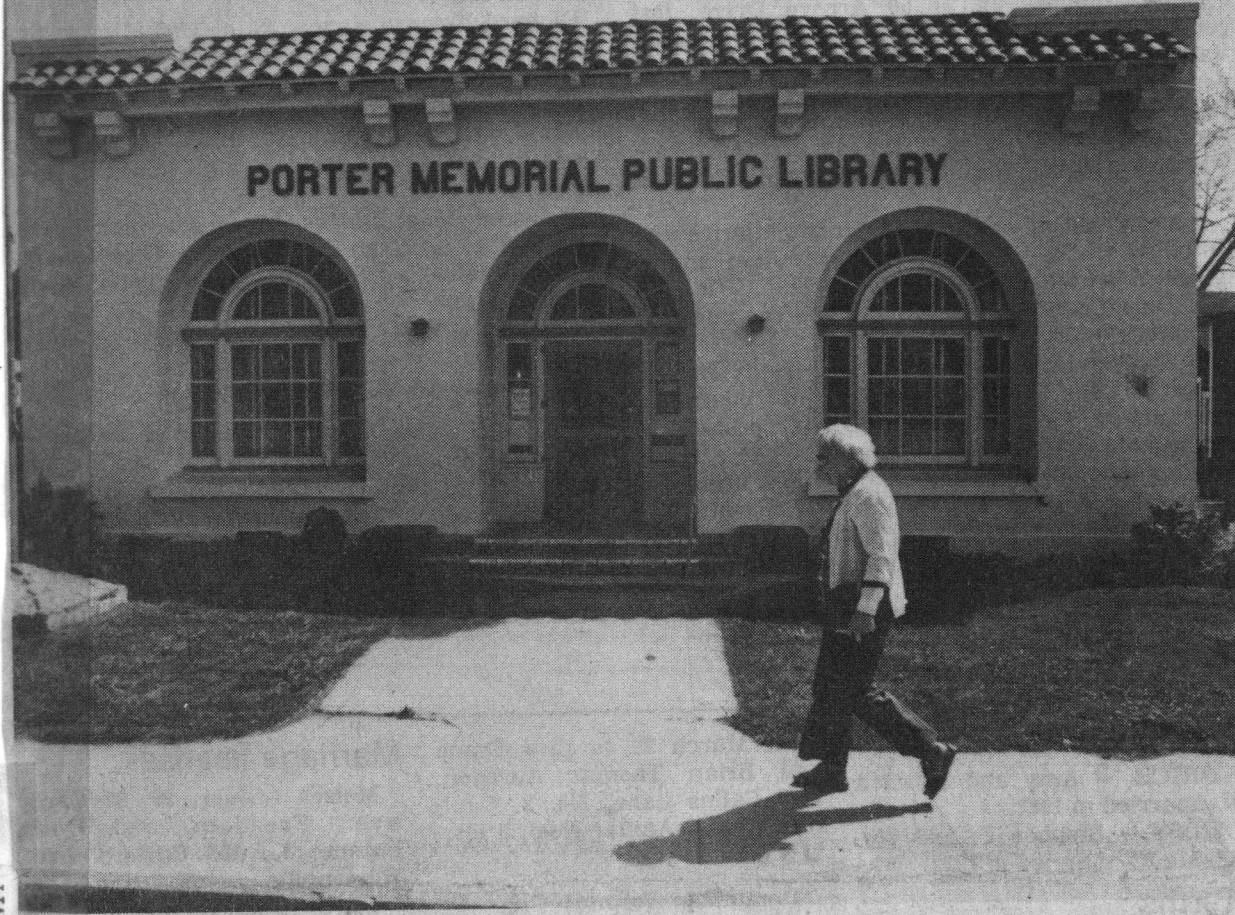
—Bookmobile services to areas in the north and south counties was suspended.

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.

"As a library person (when budget cuts were made) I was dismayed, yet the county was facing a crisis," she said.

Bunnett, active in the League of Women Voters, said she "lobbied long and loud against

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Sam Vestal

Porter Library in Soquel withdrew from the system. It's operated by volunteers.

APTOS BRANCH LIBRARY
7695 Soquel Drive
Aptos, California 95003
REFERENCE

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.

"I was really sick when Prop. 13 passed," she said. "I knew what it meant. But when we had to close the libraries, it was still emotional."

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. Some of them, she said, were little more than reading rooms. While she said those branches provided a valuable service to many, the cuts had to be taken somewhere.

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."

Berlin admits the small branches were limited and weren't in locations that would serve much more than neighborhoods. But his complaint is that the Board of Supervisors

simply shut them down with no thought for other services.

Had it been up to him, some plans would have been made for larger and more central libraries.

"They (small libraries) weren't good in the first place, but they'd been there a long time," he said. "From a pure business point, they weren't effective or efficient. But it was impossible to get the fiscal powers-that-be to do anything (more than close the branches)."

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.

Berlin and Bunnett voted with other trustees at a meeting July 3, 1978 to close the branches.

"I had very mixed feelings," said Bunnett. "It was very sad. But you have to be realistic. If there isn't any money, you must do something."

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 hopefully, the next expansion will be in the Midcounty.

"What's next is improved services for the area they call the Midcounty, although I'm not sure that's a correct term. It would be Capitola, Soquel, Live Oak and Twin Lakes," she said. "The population in that area has just boomed. That area very definitely is next on the agenda."

Bunnett said it would be nearly impossible to restore the old libraries; Capitola was a rented storefront and is now an art gallery, Twin Lakes has been converted back to a residence and Soquel has dropped from the system. Book collections from the closed branches have been dispersed; some books have been put in other libraries, others are stored or have become obsolete. It would probably be more economical to open one new, larger library, she said.

While a site is certainly the first consideration, the long-term investment, she said, is staff salaries and benefits. Bunnett said it would require a commitment from the county to pay a librarian and other

employees before a Midcounty branch could be considered.

"Staffing is the problem, it's the ongoing problem of salaries," she said. "That would have to come out of tax money. The county would just have to be willing to pay the staff."

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 Midcounty 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."