

# County Threatens To Go Its Own Way On Library

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An attempt to force the city of Santa Cruz into a breach of contract so the county could break the city-county library contract and build a separate library system was bantered around by supervisors Tuesday during budget hearings.

The scheme was another salvo in the interminable battle of the books being waged between the city and the county over its joint-powers contract to run the library system.

This time around, in order to put the city into a corner, the county would go ahead with plans to build a new library in either the San Lorenzo Valley or Mid-County area and put up the \$506,000 it has for the project.

That act would require the city to come up with its one-third of the cost, around \$250,000, or be in breach of contract.

Chief Librarian Charles Atkins told the county board that the city did not have the money on hand, but would be willing to finance its share on time payments. It was decided that if the city couldn't front the money, and it's not in this year's city budget, then the contract will have been violated.

"I think that's the best thing that can happen," said Supervisor Dan Forbus. "The city will not be able to meet the terms of the contract and then we can break the contract and they can take the downtown library and sit there and play with it."

Supervisor Gary Patton who represents the largest segment of the city on the board, quickly tried to tone down Forbus' challenge. "That's not totally my position," he said. He believed the city would be able to come up with its quarter of a million and meet the terms of the contract.

County Auditor Art Merrill then surprised everyone by suggesting that the county simply take the city's portion of the operating funds, since his office "controls the purse strings," and funnel the money into building the new library.

That information brought Atkins to his feet and to the podium where he told Merrill, "You know better, that's foolishness."

County Counsel Clair Carlson was asked if it was foolishness and he told the press, "I can't answer on the legality so soon, but I can say it will certainly get the city's attention."

Patton noted, "Well, after a series of dull budget sessions, we've finally given The Sentinel a story."

The battle over the library goes back a number of years, picking up around 1975 when Supervisor Ed Borovatz came on the board with the belief that the county was getting the short

end of it.

He said the county pays 70 percent of the costs and the city controls the Library Board.

Everything got worse last year when the shortage of funds because of Proposition 13 cut the library budget and five of the branch libraries were sliced, totally or partly, from the system to make it on their own with volunteer forces.

Tuesday, the board made two allocations that may presage the re-entry of the branches in the coming years.

The board released \$8,743 to the Freedom Branch Library (\$5,000 of that out of the \$10,000 set aside to cover any increase in the Watsonville Library circulation), and also allocated \$3,000 to the Ben Lomond Branch for shelves.

Since \$5,000 of the Freedom Branch money comes from the library budget, it in effect keeps that branch within the system.

Ben Lomond was not welcomed back in, but given a one-time grant.

Forbus initially argued against re-funding the branches, at least on a piecemeal basis, saying they all should be treated the same and either brought back into the system or left to make it on their own.

"I don't know how to pick and choose when the money isn't there to fund them all," Forbus said.

He advised the board that any dipping into the federal revenue sharing monies, as was done for Ben Lomond's shelves, probably will mean cuts will have to be made in child care and senior citizen programs.

Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat advised the board to look at the social services and health budgets to find funds during today's and Thursday's hearings. She noted the two budgets contain around \$33 million of the county's \$75.8 million budget.

However, Forbus reminded her that nearly all of the money in the two budgets comes from the state-federal vaults and has strings attached.

Undaunted, Liddicoat said, "I'd like to take the money from Food and Nutrition Services and keep them all open."

Patton said they all could be funded if the board would realign its priorities.

"We have begun lopping off branches because the hidden agenda of this budget is the \$3 million for a new jail . . . our priorities ought to be re-examined," Patton said.

Following the fireworks, the board approved the library's \$1,287,022 budget and added about \$12,000 to that for the two branches.