

Opinion

✓ A library's top priority is books

6-28-87

THE ONGOING city-county dispute of what should be done with about \$100,000 in library funds stands as an example of how government can't please all the people all the time.

The city of Santa Cruz says the money should go for books, one million of which were circulated last year. The need for books is greater than ever, it says, because the system for the first time didn't provide local funding for books this fiscal year. A good point.

County supervisors have voted to earmark the money for service-starved Live Oak, an area with 27,000 residents that has been neglected for years. Also a good point.

A tough decision, but a library's top priority is books, and our system can't afford to fall further behind in fulfilling its main purpose. Let's get the house in order before we start building new rooms. Then, when a Live Oak branch is built, the library will have more of the resources that should be provided system-wide.

The 30-year joint library system agreement approved in 1964 includes stipulations that make continual bliss unlikely. Two-thirds of the library's financial support comes from the county, but the city has the real say over how the system is run.

The city has run the system well, despite recent complaints that the main library and other branches in the municipality have received more

than their fair share of recent budget allocations. Quality branch libraries in Aptos and the San Lorenzo Valley show the unincorporated area hasn't been forgotten, and city officials recognize there is a need for another one in Live Oak.

Some county supervisors last week threatened to pull out of the system if they don't get their way. After wrestling with a tight budget predicament for a few weeks, we can understand their frustration; however, it would be shortsighted for them to go it alone.

The city owns the books in today's system and the thought of a financially strapped county — with a big payment coming next year for the Boulder Creek branch — becoming independent doesn't make sense. Getting approval of a ballot measure to establish a county library fee has been mentioned as a means to fund such a move, but that may be little more than wishful thinking in today's tax atmosphere.

There's little — if any — argument that new branch libraries should be built in the unincorporated sectors of the county, where 54 percent of the population resides, when adequate funds become available for such a capital outlay.

Today, however, the most pressing need is to upgrade the offerings for the 70,000 library cardholders and that means directing available funds to the book budget.