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Library Levies in Tillamook County

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In the March 1997 election, the Tillamook County Library funding levy resulted in a 54 percent turnout, and passed with a 76 percent yes vote. This was both the highest election percentage in Tillamook County history, and the year's highest percentage of library ballot box support in Oregon. This success was not by chance, and I would like to share some of the important lessons that we learned during the process.

At this juncture, a bit of Tillamook County library history seems appropriate.

In 1907, the local Shakespeare Club established a public library for Tillamook City. Discussions about the establishment of a countywide library system had begun by 1915. Subsequent to the establishment of what would become the main library in Tillamook, libraries (now considered

branches) were begun in smaller county communities. Bay City opened in 1922, Garibaldi in 1928, and Manzanita in 1930. In 1947 these libraries were incorporated into a county library system. The Pacific City branch, begun in 1971, is our system's late-comer. A Rockaway Beach Friends group has acquired and is presently converting a building into a library branch, which is scheduled to open later this year. Manzanita and Pacific City exist at opposite ends of the county and are our "high volume" branches. We intend to use these magnificent new branch buildings as our "book-end examples" in the planning of a new main library in Tillamook.

By agreement, the creation and maintenance of local branches is the responsibility of the local community. Library personnel, programming, and materials are provided by the county library system.

Bookmobile service began in 1948, serving the rugged rural areas of our 1,100-square-mile county. On average, the bookmobile is either our second or third most active branch.

An old cliché holds that an outsider's point of view is often a good thing. An outsider's point of view is what I brought to Tillamook County when I had the great good fortune to get the director's job in 1991.

I had been the director of a mid sized rural library system in Pennsylvania. There, library funding is on a yearly 50-50 basis, which is more or less equally derived from state and local tax sources. As a consequence, librarians spend much of their time lobbying various taxing authorities in an effort to stay even. Far better than any anecdote I might provide, the current state of Pennsylvania public libraries reflects the unhappy result of this situation.

In Tillamook County, I found things to be quite different including the existence of a very competent, reasonably well-paid, and friendly staff.

I came to work in June 1991, facing a two-year library funding levy scheduled for the March 1992 ballot. At the time there was a good deal of turmoil in, around, and about the library. The previous director had left under unfortunate circumstances and there were adverse commentaries, and dire predictions about the upcoming vote.

I did not take such negative prognostications too seriously. I had quickly discovered that Oregon is as fine a place to be a librarian as it is in which to live. The first Oregon advantage I noted was in the dynamics of patron usage. In the East, where regular library use by about 20 percent of the population is primarily responsible for circulation statistics, librarians soon learn to recognize patrons. Not so in a place like Tillamook County, where half the population now holds a library card and where the library usage rate almost triples the national average. The diversity of our patrons was also a pleasant surprise. With the possible exception of cactus cultivators, we must have someone from every possible vocation living in Tillamook County.

This diversity was typified by reaction to the ongoing library automation process. Patrons often asked questions confirming both the need for automation and for the Coastal Resource Sharing Network, a consortium of computer-linked libraries made possible through automation. Network operation has had the effect of tripling the collections of member libraries.

Such diversity represented the one real problem I had in becoming a "true" Oregon librarian, however. It took me a year to fully appreciate the sophistication of patron interest and attitude as it pertains to book selection. But even this had a peripheral benefit. When dealing with would-be censors, I found that the typical complaining patron understood and would begrudgingly accept my standard reply: "I can sympathize, but if we remove the book you don't like, then everybody has the same right, and there will soon be no books in the library."

Clearly, in Oregon I saw that libraries were important to the grand scheme of things. The Tillamook County Commissioners had always been encouraging and publicly supportive. So had the business community. Even the bad reputation of our one super-curmudgeon patron had a positive effect. I was often stopped on the street, and in effect told, "If so-and-so is against you, we're for you!"

As a consequence of all this, I was pleased but not surprised to see our 1992 funding levy pass with a 66 percent yes vote.

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Planning for the 1994 levy commenced during the preceding autumn. Changes related to increased costs and long-range planning were now apparent. Long-range planning is restricted by the fixed amount provided by the levy process and requires the creation of alternate operating scenarios.

In our case, health insurance costs had increased, the employees' union would be negotiating a new contract, and our weary old bookmobile, then being towed in once a month, had to be replaced.

We finally decided that a three-year levy would be the most practical solution to our problems.

Having learned that Oregonians are open minded, I set up a "Talk to Sara" schedule at the branches, arranged to be interviewed on local radio, and made myself available to any group willing to listen to a real-live librarian. I had by this time discovered that many patrons did not know precisely how the library was funded. A presumption existed, due in part to a confused funding history as well as to the archaic wording of the mail-in ballot, that the library would remain open even if the levy failed.

I used every opportunity to correct this misunderstanding, and the ballot was rewritten.


A few patrons felt they were being threatened or intimidated by this. No one wanted to admit that *their* library might close. Hostility to a vaguely worded school bond on the same ballot also complicated matters. The local paper's editorial finally put the issue in perspective. "If the levy fails, the library closes." The school bond subsequently failed by a wide margin, while the library levy passed with a 58 percent yes vote.

I have come to realize that candor and our clarification of ballot language was nothing more than an anticensorship exercise. Every librarian should be able to support this concept. If taxpayers are asked to vote yes for library funding, they must be allowed to know what a no vote would mean.

The impending chaos threatened by Measure 47 prompted vigorous preparations for the 1997 library levy. The 50 percent voter requirement was a special concern. As it turned out, patron concerns about the new statute's effect on their library had a positive effect. The Tillamook Bay Community College, to

which we now provide full library service, energetically provided information on the theme "If the library closes, we lose our accreditation." Library Friends' groups in every community made calls, put up posters, and paid for advertising which included cable TV announcements. Notices went out in newsletters and accompanied water bills.

The county commissioners remained outspokenly supportive and, within the legal limits, encouraged my efforts. I was again interviewed on local radio and soon lost track of how many groups I addressed. Although not able to solicit a yes vote, I was able to respond to often pertinent questions. Our local paper ran features and highlighted a library branch each week prior to the mail-in ballot's due date.

The resulting 76 percent yes vote speaks for itself. Our success has also stimulated planning for our new main library. For months, people I didn't know, and sometimes couldn't recall meeting, would come to offer congratulations, and proclaim, "We did it!" They were right. This kind of reaction serves to emphasize and underline my creed as a librarian: PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT MEANS PUBLIC SUPPORT! 

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