

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

February 2004

I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by how well we support our libraries.
from Cosmos by Carl Sagan

...and so I worry. Two concerns haunt my thoughts regarding the immediate future of Bellingham Public Library: 1) stable funding, and 2) governance. They are not unrelated.

This year we began to realize the full effects of previous initiatives; however, I- 864 poses even greater threats. As resubmitted (a few tweaks were required) it reads:

Ballot Title

Initiative Measure No. 864 concerns property tax levies. This measure would reduce by 25% regular property tax levies of counties, cities and local districts (for example, fire and library districts), but excludes any voter-approved levies and specifies school levies as excluded. The measure, if passed, goes into effect January 2005.

Library operations are funded through the City's general fund as are Fire, Police, Parks & Recreation, Museum, Planning and a host of support departments. Property taxes represent roughly 17% of general fund revenues; a 25% rollback is equivalent to nearly \$2.5 million -- or, as Mayor Mark observed, almost the entire library budget or 1.5 museum budgets, etc., etc. Taking into further consideration the future (FY 2008) rescission of B&O taxes (14.4% of GF revenues) as enacted by the legislature last year, the picture for the fiscal health of the General Fund is not enhanced. I think it unlikely that sales tax revenues will wholly compensate for the losses sustained from property and B&O taxes.

Assuming a minimum threshold for public safety, there is no guarantee the burden will be borne equally among all General Fund departments. Altogether, it is possible that the library's budget might sustain cuts up to \$1 million annually over the next several years.

Options? Other than severe downsizing you may wish to think about the pros and cons of 1) conducting an annual supplemental capital campaign; 2) merging with the county library system (WCLS is an independent taxing authority); 3) expanding the endowment fund and appropriating annual distributions for library operations; 4) creating an independent library foundation; 5) establishing an enterprise venture (Books & Bagels?) or 6) implementing a library utility tax or voluntary donation check-off. Ideas are endless, but adopting and enacting any one of them requires research, expertise, salesmanship, time and patience. I'm sure you can and will think of many possibilities, but it is not too early to begin.

Governance keeps cropping up in the legislature as an "if not now, soon" issue. Support has ramped up steadily over the last four years. This year's effort has manifested as ESSB 5150, Library Trustee Elections. Basically the bill overrides the authority of elected officials, e.g. the mayor or county executive, to appoint members to boards and/or commissions by providing for a recall process. The tactics are reminiscent of those used in the South to stack school boards, repeal "liberal" agendas and redistrict congressional boundaries. While it probably will not get to the floor this year, the proponents are becoming more and more sophisticated. A small conservative shift in the composition of the legislature would almost assure passage next year

short of a concerted movement to halt such action. Because this is a sleeper bill, opposition is not well organized.

Supporters link such reform to “making libraries safe for children” and Internet pornography is the rallying point. Though doubtless the authors are well intentioned, aren’t we all, the bill is riddled with questionable assumptions and auditing impossibilities. Passage would stress scarce resources in ways not envisioned. Even if the candidates were absolved from paying filing fees the cost of an election is not insignificant and would have to be absorbed by the library – to mention just one of the juggernauts.

On a more optimistic note, two employees were recognized by the Mayor and City Council for many dedicated years of service: Cindy Geri has worked in the library for 25 years; Donna Graddock for 20. Their efforts contribute greatly to the library’s popularity. It has been rewarding to work with them.