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Charley's Corner

The Political Ramifications of Inter-Library Cooperation

by Charles R. Dyer, Retired Director of the San Diego County Public Law Library. All views expressed in this article are entirely my own.

The San Diego County Public Law Library's geographical service area is the entire County of San Diego, California, which is 4,200 square miles, with a population of nearly 3 million people. The City of San Diego is a much smaller entity, with a population of about 1.2 million.

Within the County of San Diego, there are eight distinct public library districts, seven of which are municipal library districts (including the San Diego Public Library, run by the City of San Diego) and one is the County Library, which runs several branches in the remaining municipalities and the unincorporated areas of the county. The primary support for the public libraries is a portion of property tax and some revenues from the general funds of the municipalities.

In 1996 and again in 1998, the eight public library districts sought to get an addition to the county's sales tax to support their programs. The addition would have been a 1/4 cent for several years, expected to bring in millions of dollars. Due to California's Prop 13, this new tax would require a two-thirds vote for passage, difficult at best. As a "Johnny come lately," the Law Library decided to try to be included in the 1998 proposal so it could share in the revenues. Of course, in order to sell the program, the several public library districts had created specific plans as to what they would do with the funds. The districts had already given their plans to their supporters during the 1996 attempt. Also, due to the structure of the proposed taxing district, the Law Library had to achieve support from a majority of the eighteen incorporated cities in the county and the county government, and probably much more than a majority. So when the Law Library sought to be included, we faced an uphill battle.

Ultimately, the Law Library was unsuccessful in convincing the governmental entities to let us participate in the sales tax measure. Unfortunately, the measure lost the second time around in 1998, as it had in 1996. The second time, they tried a special election, hoping that only those concerned about library services would come out to vote. To their surprise, the vote was barely 51 percent, as opposed to 62 percent in the 1996 general election. The anti-tax forces were ultimately better at getting turnout than the libraries. Attempts to pass such a sales tax are now no longer being tried in San Diego County. At least, the Law Library was not blamed for the defeat.

Nevertheless, we at the San Diego County Law Library learned a lot from the experience. When my trustees and I visited the friends groups of many of the public libraries, those supporters were openly hostile to the Law Library. They thought that the library served only lawyers. Upon reflection, our board then decided to change our name and add the word "Public" to it, which we

did in 1997. That was a very good move.

The public librarians themselves were not so hostile, as they recognized from the referrals they made that the Law Library served a niche of their clientele that they could not serve well without tremendous added expense. As one librarian noted, given our expertise, our collection and the fact that our four locations were near the four courthouses, had we not existed, they would have had to invent us. They were only quite rightly upset that we had not participated in their planning earlier. Their idea had arisen during meetings of the Serra Cooperative Library System, which is the local public library network. Years earlier, before my tenure there, the Law Library had dropped out because it presumably had nothing to gain from participation, since we rarely referred any of our patrons to the other libraries. That was a mistake. We should have been there all along, not just for the mutual political support.

Since 1997, as a member of Serra, the Law Library has developed programs to outreach to the public libraries. We have taken our classes for self-represented litigants to their locations and trained their librarians how to respond to legal questions at their libraries and when to refer patrons to us. Some of the grants we received from State Library under the Library Services and Technology Act included the public libraries as active partners. We also were able to participate in joint training programs and grants that Serra received. Currently, Serra is using a grant to set up video conferencing facilities at the participating libraries, which will greatly enhance our outreach and training capabilities and cut down on travel to meetings.

Now the friends groups see us in a very different way. Also, we help enhance the appeal of public libraries to two classes that ordinarily are not heavily involved in public library friends groups: the poor lower classes, who often come to libraries as a matter of need, rather than for entertainment and education; and the upper middle classes, who are more prone to buy their books than borrow them, but cannot buy legal information so readily.

All this goes back to enhancing the political support for public law libraries. Other county law librarians in California have also become very active in their local public library networks and with their public libraries. So now, the California Library Association, which is basically run by the public librarians, can be called upon to be supportive of county law library legislative efforts. Certainly, the coordination on legislation with them is vastly improved, and opposition is avoided. At the local level, the public librarians (insofar as they are allowed) can support local law library measures, such as filing fee increases. (The public library networks are particularly in that regard, because you can get a supporting resolution from the network, but you often cannot get one from a municipal library because it would have to be vetted by that municipality's city council.)

Cooperation is essential for all libraries that serve the public.