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PERSPECTIVES

Public should demand peaceful library

While we support building a new library, the focus should be books

Students at the University are fortunate in at least one respect: We have access to books. Hundreds of thousands of books. Entire floors filled with shelf after shelf of books.

Other Eugene residents aren't quite so fortunate. While the Eugene Public Library also holds books, the aging facility in which they sit is small, cramped and more than a little musty.

For years, community members have been struggling to update the library. It is an admirable cause, but until recently it has seemed to be a hopeless one.

Now, however, there are signs the situation may finally be changing. The City Council has allocated \$18 million of urban renewal funds to go to building a new library facility.

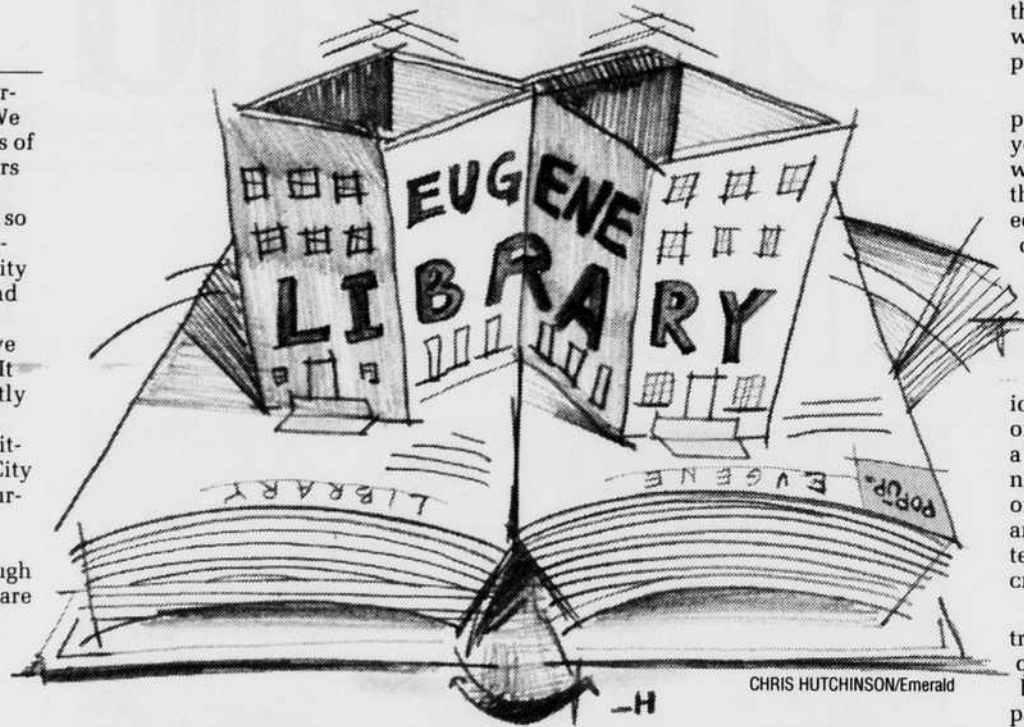
Assuming the council follows through on this pledge and library supporters are able to raise the remaining \$7 million needed to cover the total cost of the new library, Eugene residents can finally look forward to a facility that will allow them to enjoy books.

There are some barriers that must be dealt with, however. Foremost is the ongoing difficulty library supporters have had getting voters to approve tax levies for library costs.

As Register-Guard reporter Joe Kidd pointed out in a detailed article on the library situation Sunday, earlier levies have failed by narrow margins — first 1 percent and then 0.25 percent. Even if a majority of voters can be persuaded to support the library, the measure could still fail in a September balloting if more than half of registered voters do not cast ballots.

If Measure 53, which would repeal the double-majority requirement, passes this spring, that concern would become, thankfully, irrelevant. We certainly hope Oregon voters display the wisdom to vote yes on 53, but library supporters should not bank on it.

As Kidd noted, library backers could avoid the double-majority dilemma by placing a measure on the November ballot; the requirement doesn't apply to certain general elections. Unfortunately, the better plan is probably to try to pass the measure in September, thereby avoiding the glut of funding measures already



AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

planned for the November election.

Obviously, it is in the best interest of Eugene community members to back a library levy in September. Libraries are important because they can store vital materials and present them in a manner that allows everyone, no matter what class, access.

University students should also be interested in seeing the library gain additional funding. No research facility is complete, and the University library has seen cutbacks that have rendered its information gaps more noticeable.

The Eugene Public Library certainly won't be able to fill most of those gaps, but it will inevitably manage to provide information, particularly about the Eugene community, that students will find valuable and would be otherwise inaccessible. Currently, though, the poor condition of the city's library facility drives many students away.

While we urge all community members, including students, to support funding a new library facility, we do have concerns about the way the money will be spent. It is important to continue

to view the library as a repository of books and journals, rather than as a multimedia entertainment center.

There are reasons to be worried. A story accompanying Kidd's piece in the Guard described a tour city officials took of other area libraries.

Included in this tour were "story-telling rooms for kids, computers with CD-ROM drives, small rooms for watching library videos and Internet plug-ins for people who bring their own laptop computers." Such "luxuries" should be approached with caution.

Libraries are primarily designed to be quiet institutions where patrons can gather information, mostly from books and magazines. Electronic additions to this quiet refuge shouldn't interfere with that mission.

Unfortunately, they often do. According to an article by Sallie Tisdale in the March 1997 Harper's, more than 40 percent of materials expenditures (which are already an alarmingly small portion of many library's budgets) are spent not on books or periodicals, but on technology. If that technology represented a

cheaper and more efficient way to relay the information contained in books, it would be welcome. Sadly, as Tisdale explained, it does not.

In particular, the monetary cost of expanding library technology is high. "Beyond the original costs of hardware, software, installation and training — and the ongoing costs of replacing all this equipment, given the rapid obsolescence of electronic technology — there are the much higher losses possible with vandalism and theft and the costs of significant staffing changes to be considered," Tisdale wrote.

Additionally, the fleeting and dynamic electronic mediums come at the cost of book purchases, leaving citizens with a library that fails in its role as community repository. The first books to go are often the most compelling, controversial and creative — in short, the sorts of materials that cannot be found on the increasingly business-oriented Internet.

Of a more aesthetic concern, but central to Tisdale's worries, is the loss of quiet space. Story rooms and CD-ROM-based "educational" games may draw patrons, but they chase away the researchers for whom the concept of a library was developed. Tisdale makes a valuable claim: Libraries that showed blockbuster movies might draw more attendees, but they wouldn't really be creating any new library patrons.

If bringing more youth into the library system requires turning it into a video arcade, there doesn't seem to be much point in drawing the children in at all. Libraries should serve as community resources, not amusement parks.

These are important considerations for those in the City Council to weigh, especially given the tight budget the library will be under. Wasting money on noisy machinery that quickly becomes obsolete is not a good use of thinly spread community resources.

Therefore, we heartily encourage community support of a new library branch, but we beg city officials to ensure that what is built is in fact a library and not merely a holding pen for those seeking information overload.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

READERS' VOICES

Is it time to put Jerry Seinfeld out to pasture?



"I don't watch TV that much. It's up to him if he doesn't want to make any more money."

Stacy Hall
 East Asian Literature and Languages



"Wow. I don't watch Seinfeld that often. From what I've heard I think he will probably go down as one of the great comedians like Jackie Gleason and all of them. I've never got a chance to watch it that much, but I've heard he's really funny."

Zach Swanson
 History



"I don't really watch TV, but I do like Seinfeld since I haven't seen it enough to be annoyed."

Jai Roberts
 Graduate Student



"Nah."

Lara Moore
 University Employee



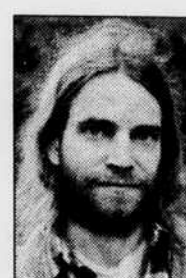
"No, I think he is overreacting. I think the show would be drawing a large crowd even though I don't watch the show."

Ryan Begley
 Humanities



"Yes, I think that he is leaving at his prime, and that's something fresh in TV because most of the series just go on until all of us wish it was over. This is leaving us on a good note."

Kyle Swanson
 History



"I have only seen the show a couple of times. I could not care less about Jerry Seinfeld."

Joe Troxel
 Environmental Studies

FYI

Correction

The story, "Court hears first cases on elections," (ODE, May 13) misidentified Matt Gross. The Emerald regrets the error.

Letters Policy

The Emerald accepts letters from members of the University and Eugene community, preferably under 400 words. Shorter letters will receive higher priority. Letters can be submitted in person at EMU, Suite 300, mailed to P.O. Box 3159, Eugene, OR, 97403, or e-mailed to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu. Please include your full name and telephone number for confirmation. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for length or style.