

Libraries Feeling Budget Pinch

By Jack Beardwood

With a budget cut of about \$400,000, the San Luis Obispo City-County Library Department will see reduced hours of operation, fewer Bookmobile services, less purchasing of new books and materials, and as many as 12 employees will be laid off.

According to Library Director Brian Reynolds, they will need to eliminate from six to eight full time employee equivalents, so many as a dozen workers could be let go because some are part-timers. He said they have yet to determine who will be laid off. The layoffs will not occur until January because the county and San Luis Obispo County Employees Association agreed to hold off for six months. The loss of the money will also likely include reduction of three to five hours a week at several branches. The branches that have just one librarian, including Cayucos and San Miguel, would stay open the same hours. Clients of their main branches — Morro Bay, San Luis Obispo, Arroyo Grande, Los Osos, Atascadero, Cambria and Nipomo — would see fewer open hours.

In order to save some \$50,000 a year, the Bookmobile program will be cut from four days to one day a week, said Reynolds. The Bookmobile provides mobile library services to outlying areas, like Pozo. It also serves communities without public libraries, like Avila Beach and Templeton. The Bookmobile parks at places where residents have trouble accessing their local libraries, including senior residences in SLO and Morro Bay.

They are also looking at having some \$150,000 less for purchase of new books and other materials. Some \$500,000 is included in the budget for new materials. “We have asked all of the Friends of the Library [organizations] to see if they could raise funds to backfill the losses their branch would lose,” said Reynolds. “They are working on that now as we speak.” Reynolds said Friends groups are critical and they contribute from \$50,000 to \$80,000 a year to support local libraries. There are Friends of the Library organizations at 12 of the 15 branch libraries. The only communities without one are California Valley, Shandon and Oceano. There is also a countywide library advocacy group called the Foundation for San Luis Obispo County Public Libraries (see: www.slolibraryfoundation.org). Things could go from bad to worse.

Depending on how the state budget ends up, there could be even more cuts, said Reynolds. According to John Culpepper, accountant for the Library Department, the 2009-10 library budget is \$8.5 million. That was determined by the County Supervisors during recent budget hearings. The budget was passed by the board June 23. “I think it’s unfortunate,” said Reynolds. “I think that a lot of the services that appear to be on the chopping block are those that serve people who don’t have that many alternatives — poor people and children — and I think that’s a bad idea. I think we in California need to take a hard look at how we fund government and figure out some better ways. To figure out the fiscal landscape better. I think that California — and our county is included — is in a mess and we all need to work together to get out of it because

our state is in trouble." Library use is on the rise even as the budget is cut. "Libraries are heavily used and very popular," said Reynolds. "In fact, our use right now is up substantially over recent years probably because of the hard times we are in. But our popularity doesn't seem to be a guarantor of funding stability." It's time to step up to the plate. "We have a very popular service," Reynolds said, "but people so far aren't willing to pay more to keep the service strong and I hope that they'll reconsider that because I think it is a huge investment for a strong community and healthy kids to have strong libraries. I think the answer is going to have to come from you and me and not necessarily from the politicians." Since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, two countywide measures have failed that would have provided additional money for libraries.