

COUNTER POINT



When You're Deserving — There's Never Enough!

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

I used to think that if we turned our bookdrop room into a library bookstore we would be rolling in the dough. Just think about it, no longer would we need to purchase circulating copies of the GED exam book, or *Do Your Own Divorce in North Carolina* — only to have it LOST in circulation after its second use. Instead, all we would need to do is keep an adequate stock of these and other titles in high demand in the new bookstore, and our problems would be solved.

That wasn't the only idea I had either. The opportunities to raise money appeared to be endless: pushcart vendors in our beautiful adjacent courtyard selling hot dogs and pretzels, a basement coffee-house complete with poetry readings and Chardonnay, and a gift shop selling local trinkets as a memento of a child's first visit to the library. In fact, we even tossed around the idea of breaking into the lucrative tourist market by doing much more than publishing and selling a few genealogical sources compiled locally. Why not really branch out and work with the local chamber of commerce and area hotels to provide "package tours" to the area for the growing number of retirees discovering the joys of family history!

Once we got going, I had no doubt we could raise the money. After all, who needed to worry about start-up costs or even meeting basic overhead expenses. With a core of well-paid government workers, (OK, so we have access to a few eager volunteers, too), and an infrastructure bought and paid for by taxpayers, we had nothing to lose and everything to gain, or so I thought!

Libraries do have a lot to lose! The issue is much bigger than merely raising a few extra dollars of loose change. It goes to the very heart of the current national debate over the role of government — what should government provide its citizens, and what services, if any, are we willing to fund. By jumping on the bandwagon of greater self-sufficiency, are we in essence supporting the view that libraries don't need, or even warrant, further government funding?

It is precisely now, when funding is threatened and resources are most scarce, that libraries must be viewed by the nation as an essential service, worthy of its support! And if we abdicate our responsibility to justify support now, who in his right mind will ever give it to us in the future?

Don't misunderstand, arguing in favor of continued and adequate government funding of libraries does not mean justifying needless and unwarranted expenditures! Support for libraries can only come when librarians are willing to refocus their energies on basic services and cut out this nonsense that libraries should be all things to all people! We must be ready to defend services that are essential, but we must also be willing to eliminate from consideration services that honestly don't belong.

We must be willing to ask ourselves the hard questions, and eliminate programs that are tangential at best. If we fail to do so ourselves, there are a lot of angry and careless people ready to do it for us! Fundraising and other activities designed to exceed adequate support of programs do have their place, but never as a substitute for full and complete funding of needed services.

There is absolutely no question that libraries, like all other institutions that feed off the public trough, need to reexamine their diet and cut out the fat. But, as every parent knows, growing children, like growing institutions should not, and cannot, be kept on a limited caloric intake as legitimate demands on their system grow. Just imagine telling your growing teenager that he is going to have to downsize his appetite!

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— Tuchmayer

Libraries have been allowed to live with just enough to sustain life, but never enough to develop into the full-fledged adult organizations they could become if they took the initiative to be financially self-reliant.

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