

Mayor Fulton speaks on Library Privatization

Mayor Bill Fulton spoke about the possibility of a private vendor becoming the contractor to provide public library service in the City of Ventura, and other library matters at the March 10 meeting of the League of Women Voters at the E.P. Foster Library Topping Room. The public was invited and about 40 people attended.

Mayor Fulton began with a history of library service and issues in the City. Public library service in the City of Ventura started about 100 years ago. For most of that time, service has been provided by the Ventura County Library. In about 1995, a fiscal crisis caused the 7 cities served by the County Library (Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Ojai, Port Hueneme, Simi Valley and Ventura) to want more control over library service in their areas, and to want tax monies generated in their areas to be returned to that area. The Cities and the County signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1997 that made these changes. Governance of the Ventura County Library changed from the Board of Supervisors to the new Ventura County Library Commission, composed of a representative from each of the cities served, and the Board of Supervisors. Because some cities are wealthier, this left some areas running at a deficit. At first this was offset by a contribution from the County General Fund, and from the State's Public Library Fund. However, tax revenue fell and the Public Library Fund was reduced to almost nothing over the years.

All of the other cities served by the County Library had only one library facility. The libraries in the other large cities (Camarillo and Simi Valley) were open 58 hours per week. For historical reasons, Ventura had 3 facilities (E.P. Foster Library, H.P. Wright Library and Avenue Library) open a total of 108 hours per week. The other areas were subsidizing Ventura. As finances got increasingly tough, the other cities declined to do so any longer. As a result, in Ventura, Wright Library was closed. (Friends of the Library fund raising enabled it to stay open 5 more months than it would have otherwise.)

Negotiations to change the Memorandum of Understanding came to a halt with the decision of the City of Camarillo to withdraw from the County Library and establish a City library in January 2011. Camarillo contracted with a private firm (LSSI) to provide library service for the City. A couple of years earlier, the City of Moorpark did the same thing.

The main revenue source for the County Library is its portion of the property tax. Other cities have added ongoing City funds in order to enhance service in their area. Ventura has not done this. Ventura voters have considered a couple of tax measures for library service. In 1995, a parcel tax proposal received 53% voter approval, but failed to gain the 2/3 vote required. In 2009, a sales tax proposal, which would have included funds to keep Wright Library open, won 43% voter approval, thus failing to attain the required majority.

These changes have caused the City of Ventura to take up a Library Strategic Planning Process that began several years ago but was halted due to budget constraints. The City wants to know what the citizens of Ventura want in terms of future library service and facilities; what options there are for providing that service; the costs involved; and what monies might be available for library service, among other things. The current effort is being funded at a cost of \$60,000 from a development fund set aside for library purposes only, from a developer who worked with the City on a Westside project.

Mayor Fulton introduced Denise Sindelar, Community Partnerships Manager for the City of Ventura, who spoke about the current Library Strategic Planning Process.

In February, a community-based board (including Friends of the Library President Kathy Thomson) was invited to hear presentations from 2 firms wishing to provide library consulting services to the City. That board made a recommendation about which consultant to hire to the Ventura Library Advisory Commission. The firm recommended is based in Florida and has extensive experience working with Gulf Coast communities that lost their libraries during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This recommendation will go to the City Council and approval of a contract with this vendor is scheduled to be on the April 4 City Council agenda. The vendor is to bring its report to the Library Advisory Commission in May, and the report and the Commission's recommendations will go to the City Council in June. This early portion of the consultant's work will involve the development of financial information, and the itemizing of choices that the city can make about how public library service will be organized, and who will provide the service. This will help the City decide whether to continue its relationship with the Ventura County Library. If the City determines to withdraw from the County Library, legal requirements say that it must give notice of intent by June 30, to be effective January 1.

The later portion of the consultant's work (through probably October 2011) will involve close consultation with the community about what it wants in the way of future library service and facilities.

In a question and answer period, Mayor Fulton was asked repeatedly about a possible contract with the private vendor LSSI, based in Maryland. Most questioners seemed to view this possibility negatively. Mayor Fulton emphasized that this is one of several options to be explored, and that decisions will be made with full public scrutiny.