

'Entrepreneurial Libraries' Could Bring Happy Endings

By MARTIN MILLER
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Of late, the tale of La Palma Branch Library reads like a Depression-era dime store novel.

A beloved and venerable institution is spared execution at the last minute after community pleading persuades bottom-line politicians to lay down the budget ax. A compromise is struck, the library lives on, and the community applauds.

If only that were the final chapter. Instead, for La Palma and other county libraries that narrowly avoided similar fates, it may be only the first chapter in an intensifying struggle to just stay open.

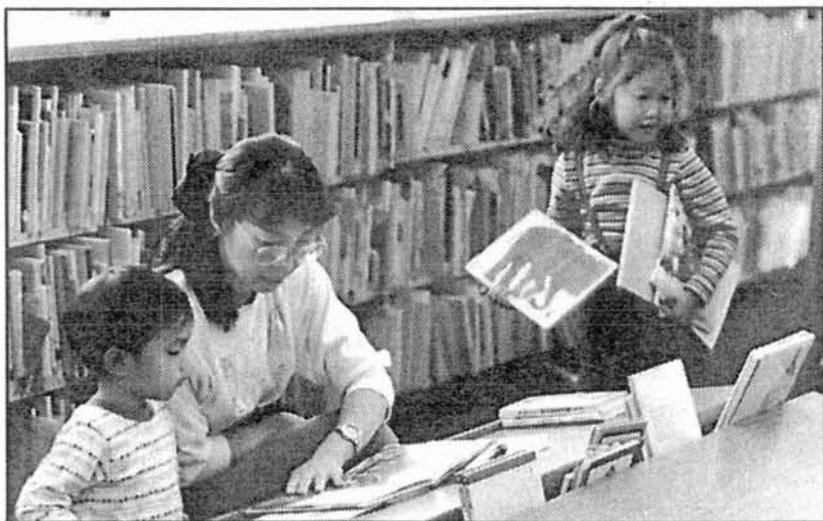
In the long run, library survival may depend upon innovative ways of tapping into new funding sources. To that end, officials from La Palma and across the state are embracing a new vision for the strapped institutions called the "Entrepreneurial Library."

The entrepreneurial library would create an independent cash flow through a host of free market-inspired ideas: selling unused development rights, opening restaurants and coffee shops, offering child care and charging for special services.

For Orange County's branch libraries, recently spared from closure, this is still a vision, not a life raft in the current budget crisis.

But the entrepreneurial approach seeks to stave off chronic funding shortages.

"Down the road, it's definitely a way to cut costs and provide more library services," said Larry Herman, a member of La Palma's



La Palma library patrons with children's books, above, and Japanese-language comics, right. Proponents of selling information services say it's the best way for libraries to prevent chronic funding shortages.



Photos by KARI RENE HALL / Los Angeles Times

library task force, which will present entrepreneurial ideas to the City Council on July 5.

Proponents of the idea blame Proposition 13 in 1978 for slashing funding and leaving California with today's dubious distinction of placing 50th nationally in total library hours open to the public.

Libraries have been devastated in the past two years. In 1993, Orange County instituted a series of staff and service cutbacks after the state began withholding millions of dollars in property tax supplements.

The county's bankruptcy chopped \$5 million from its library system's \$25-million annual budget, prompting the Board of Supervisors to propose shutting down La

Palma and five other libraries in the county's 28-branch system. But supervisors, bowing to community pressure, agreed to keep all but one of those branches open, but for only two days a week.

The entrepreneurial library aims to compete—not unlike a business—in offering the services of the Information Age. Such new fee-based services include teleconferencing and video-conferencing, special tutoring and computer training, and 900-numbers.

Libraries of the future should be "total service environments, like Las Vegas casinos," State Librarian Kevin Starr told a gathering of 300 library officials earlier this year in Brea.

The county already has implemented some entrepreneurial

ideas, said County Librarian John M. Adams. In the next year, Adams expects to collect an estimated \$1.5 million by renting extra copies of bestsellers at \$1.50 per week, charging 50 cents to reserve a book, and increasing fees for overdue books, tapes and compact discs.

Adams seeks to generate additional revenue by capitalizing on the high number of people a library draws. For example, a new library in Aliso Viejo, scheduled to open in 1998, will house a restaurant, with its profits to be shared by the entire library system.

"We have to find creative ways to plug the holes in a collapsing dike," Adams said.

One of the more lucrative entrepreneurial ideas is to transform libraries from a staid community

fixture to a dynamic real estate asset. Under one scenario, the library system would reap a windfall by auctioning off the unused development rights.

In effect, the library system would sell off density rights from branches that did not build out to the maximum allowed by zoning codes. Thus, with the exchange, a developer could construct a denser project than otherwise would be permitted.

Purists bristle at suggestions that the hallowed public library would sully itself in the world of commerce. And they fear that libraries will begin charging even for basic services, driving out the poor.

But, say entrepreneurial supporters like Brea City Manager Frank Benest, since the public lacks the political will to approve a special assessment tax for libraries they are forced to enter the marketplace to survive.

"People want a magic solution," Benest said. "They say get more volunteers and charge higher fines but that's just not enough now."

And, Benest said, libraries will never charge citizens fees for the basic services they have come to expect from their local branch.

What's clear, say entrepreneurial proponents, is that libraries not only must be preserved, but must prosper to achieve their mission of informing a knowledge-hungry public.

"We are beginning to realize libraries are critical to maintaining the quality of life," Benest said. "It's really a pillar of the community."

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