

Library system seeks autonomy to define rights

An oversight in a 25-year-old state law could spell trouble for the Farmington Community Library system.

The law, which has been recently revamped to correct the oversight, has jurisdiction over district libraries such as the Farmington area system. But it fails to define a district library.

"That omission makes the library system a legal responsibility of the cities of Farmington and Farmington Hills according to the courts and some state agencies, said library director Gordon Lewis.

This failure could lead to complicated legal problems for the cities and the library system unless the two municipalities agree to a special election which would revise local ordinances in accordance with new state law, Lewis explained.

Farmington City Council last week agreed to the change with the special election tentatively scheduled for May 8.

Farmington Hills City Council will consider the matter tonight (Monday). The cities must agree to hold the election before the ordinances could be changed.

The change in the law would define the Farmington Library System as an authority independent of the two cities.

The change would help the library's and the cities' situation in possible suits against the library, Lewis said.

FOR EXAMPLE, if a patron slips on library property and sues, the case would be directed against the two cities instead of the library system under the existing ordinances.

If the ordinances are changed, the cities could not be named as parties in such a suit.

Revolving the law wouldn't change any of the services offered by the libraries which circulate about a half million books a year and operate on a yearly budget close to \$1 million. About 40,000 persons a month visit the library for programs or to browse.

But a change in the law would help the library in hiring, firing and lay-offs, Lewis said.

Library employees who have been laid-off or fired have found it difficult to collect unemployment compensation from the Michigan Employment Security Commission (MESC). The MESC doesn't recognize the library as an independent authority and views the two cities as responsible for its (the library's) employees.

Taxes which support the library system are now collected and appropriated by the two cities.

UNDER THE REVISED law, the library board of trustees would levy property taxes to support the system. The tax rate would have a 1.5 mill ceiling, or \$1.50 for each \$1,000 in assessed value.

The library's tax rate is now 1.1 mill and Lewis says that level would be maintained. He doesn't anticipate the tax increasing beyond an additional 0.1 mill in the near future.

Lewis views the change as a technicality.

"There was an error in the initial law. There have been many changes in society in the last 20 years. The educational level has risen dramatically. Libraries are used more. And inflation has pushed their costs up.

"Libraries are financially a lot bigger than they were 20 years ago," he said.

If the change is voted down, Lewis doesn't see an immediate effect on the library but eventually fears the system's nebulous legal position will create problems.

"We would continue in a never never land," he said.

"If nothing occurred, there would be no problem. But if a legal problem arises, then the misinterpretation of the law could pose tremendous potential for trouble."



Demolishing a landmark

Finally, residents in the southeast section of the city are seeing a durable landmark being demolished. Old Waack's Bar, which burned in January 1978 is finally meeting the wrecker's ball. Neighbors had protested the existence of the burned out hulk fearing it would be a danger to their children. (Staff photo)

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