Library Officials Lobby Politicians

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State funding and federal laws criticized by librarians as an invasion of privacy topped the list of discussion Monday during a gathering of library officials and area legislators.

The broad scope of concerns prove that while libraries work on the local level, they are also affected by decisions made in Springfield and Washington, D.C.

Library employees and elected board members mingled with area legislators during a special breakfast meeting to discuss funding issues and other challenges libraries face. About 20 state and federal legislators appeared at the 15th annual legislative breakfast hosted by the Wheeling-based North Suburban Library System at the Arboretum Club in Buffalo Grove.

"We have to let (legislators) see libraries are important to their constituents," said Donald Roalkvam, president of the Library System Board. "Libraries are vitally important to the people they serve, and they are an economic and social engine to the local communities."

Since Monday was Presidents' Day, and state legislators did not report to Springfield until Wednesday, many state lawmakers were able to attend. Some brought good news to share, but others did not. Many legislators warned that Gov. Rod Blagojevich's proposed budget, which he was scheduled to unveil Wednesday, carries little new money for libraries this year.

"You're going to have to hold your own," said State Rep. Mark Beaubien, R-52nd. "You are not going to get help from Springfield this year. I know it's bad news, but I often have to deliver that message."

Others criticized the governor for proposing a $21 million measure to buy books for children 5 and under through the school system rather than libraries.

"If we have the money, I'd rather give it to the professionals," said State Rep. Ed Sullivan, R-51st. "I will work to bring funds to (the libraries)."

Many legislators pledged to support legislation in the Illinois House that proposes to amend the Tax Increment Financing Act to give some relief to libraries if homes are built in TIF districts, which can limit property tax revenues for up to 23 years. A similar amendment passed in 1999 to help school districts. State Rep. Sid Mathias, R-53rd, is the main sponsor of the House bill. A similar bill will hit the Illinois Senate floor this session.

Five state representatives promised to sign on as co-sponsors of the bill at the breakfast meeting. State representatives Kathy Ryg, D-59th; Karen May, D-58th; Paul Froehlich, R-56th; Elaine Nekritz, D-57th; and Suzanne "Suzie" Bassi, R-54th, all pledged to sign on.

State Sen. Wendell Jones, R-27th, said he was "sure" the TIF amendment would pass the senate.

Tamiye Meehan, director of the Indian Trails Public Library District in Wheeling, spent the morning trying to drum up support for the amendment. She handed out a prepared statement to legislators and library officials all morning.

"The library is in a unique situation because we serve people of all ages, unlike the schools," she said. "When you put homes with people who use the library in those districts, we need to serve them."

A petition waited for signatures at the entrance of the Arboretum Club to get some aspects of the USA Patriot Act repealed, specifically measures that allow federal investigators to secretly seize bookstore and library records.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, cited those provisions as reasons for her vote against the USA Patriot Act when it came to the House floor in October 2001. She vowed to support the changes.

"It's necessary to fight the war on terrorism, but not to turn over the rights of libraries or their users," she said. "Americans have the right to read what they want and the freedom of privacy libraries are guaranteeing them."

Library system officials said they were pleased to see so many legislators at the event.