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Library to seek fiscal help from Lansing, ICSD voters

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Journal Staff

ITHACA -- The Tompkins County Public Library's Board of Directors on Tuesday approved placing a public referendum on two school district ballots in May.

The referendum would levy a tax to help the library pay for permanent Sunday hours and a larger acquisitions budget. A 30-year-old state law allows public libraries to place referendums on the school district ballots.

If approved May 17 by voters in the Lansing Central School District and the Ithaca City School District, the referendum would raise \$4.5,000 for the library.

The levy would establish a tax rate of 27 cents per \$1,000 of taxable assessed value. Property owners who own a home valued at \$100,000 would pay \$27 in library taxes if the referendum is approved. The referendum would raise \$799,998 in the Ithaca City School District and \$175,002 in the Lansing Central School District.

"We are giving the public and the community a chance to tell us what are their thoughts on the direction of this library," said Gary Woloszyn, chairman of the library's board of directors. "Truly, this is about choice."

The library's board decided to pursue the referendum after researching other funding mechanisms for the past three years. The library receives the bulk of its funding -- \$2.1 million in 2005 -- from Tompkins County. But the county had decreased its support some years since the new library opened in the fall of 2000.

While the library did receive more funding in 2005, it has had to lay off staff, cut back on the purchases of books and other items, and cut back its Sunday hours since 2001. Simultaneously, the library has solicited support from private donors for items, like magazine subscriptions and Sunday hours, but none of the donations came with yearly guarantees.

Why it matters

- **WHAT:** The Tompkins County Public Library needs additional funding outside of traditional sources to maintain and grow its operation. The library's Board of Directors voted on Tuesday to put public referendums on the Ithaca City School District and Lansing Central School District ballots.

- **IMPACT:** If the referendum is approved, the library would levy a total of \$975,000 in taxes in the two districts to support its operations. The tax rate would be 27 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. A property owner with a home assessed at \$100,000 would pay \$27 in library taxes if the referendums are approved.

- **WHAT'S NEXT:** The public referendums will be conducted on the same day voters in the Ithaca and Lansing school districts approve school budgets and vote for board of education candidates. The elections will be held on May 17.

"The users of the library are pushing and demanding more of us," said Janet Steiner, executive director. "We need to meet those needs. The only reason we are meeting our minimum standards is because of private funding."

As part of the resolution passed by the board of directors on Tuesday, the library will lobby the Tompkins County Legislature to pass a resolution acknowledging its responsibility to provide funding for the library to the best of its ability. The Legislature passed a similar resolution in 1999.

There are no plans for the county to pull its funding.

"The future looks grim," Woloszyn said. "The county can't help us. We couldn't do a library district because of current laws. The only available resource available to the library was to go to the public."

Steiner said of the 700 public libraries in New York state, about 300 use some sort of public referendum for funding.

In Tompkins County, three libraries currently use a public referendum or a similar mechanism. Those libraries are the Groton Public Library, the Ulysses Philomathic Public Library and the Newfield Public Library.

If the referendum is approved, the only municipality in the county that would not offer tax levy support is Dryden's Southworth Public Library.

Steiner said that there are discussions in Dryden about offering a funding referendum in Dryden within the next two years.

"If we didn't go to the public and say 'What do you want us to do?', we would never be able to deliver the library we think our patrons are asking us to do," Woloszyn said.

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Originally published Wednesday, February 23, 2005

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