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Lassy Star

On May 15 the Lansing Community Library Center (LCLC) is going to ask school district voters to approve a charter and elect a board of directors. If approved 17 cents per \$1000 of assessed property value will be added to the school tax bill to be allocated to the library. The tax is actually separate from the school tax -- the only connection is that the geographical district served by the library is the same as that served by the school district, and the library vote is tacked onto the school ballot.

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While the charter will represent only 0.6% of all property tax dollars, it may be a hard sell in an atmosphere in which many taxpayers are saying they have had enough. But library volunteers are making the case that LCLC is a gift to the community that has already been presented at no tax cost, and the small amount of money they are asking to hire a professional librarian and provide a full range of library services is a good deal. And they are hoping that the recent failure of the school capital project will be an asset, not a liability. "I'm of the optimistic opinion that because of that giant bond issue got voted down people might be feeling a tad more relieved they are not paying the \$21 million plus for that," says Fund Raising Committee member Donna Scott. "Maybe when they see this little dab here they will approve it."

Library officials originally planned to put the charter to a vote last year, but decided to wait. Board Chairwoman Marlaine Darfler said at that time that LCLC wanted "to put our house in order" before asking the taxpayers to contribute. Arguably they have done just that. The library has been operated entirely by about 50 volunteers at no cost to taxpayers for more than five years. It has completed two capital projects entirely paid for by private donations, the most recent being a \$385,000 expansion. LCLC operates in the black -- the capital projects and other programs are paid for with no loans. The result is a newly reopened facility that is poised to go to the next level of service.

"Clearly, as far as our long range plan to date, the big issue was getting enough money, raising enough money, then building the addition, and doing the renovation of this whole building," Scott explains. "We've got that pretty well done now. We need to keep fund raising for some other things, but basically we got the big bucks job done."

Scott says the library is up to about 2,250 card-carrying patrons. That amounts to over 20% of the town's population. Its holdings currently include 13,000 books and videos. Those are substantially expanded by the availability of inter-library loans. Free wireless Internet access is available there and an exhibition room is already being used for regular exhibits of local art and history. Meeting rooms are available for community groups, and special programs are held in the library regularly.

"The library has been very well received and used by our town," Scott says. "We have all sorts of connections with the schools too -- the elementary school and the middle school especially. They have regular

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bus trips up here with the children to come and learn about a public library. Our summer reading program has been very well attended. We also have an increasingly large collection of large print books. The people in our community who use those want more and more of those. All the people who have visual impairment, they have read them all and want more. We also have audio books on tape that have come in through donations to help a group like that too."

If the charter passes the money will be used to hire a certified librarian qualified to provide a full range of library services to the town. Aside from the day to day management of the library a librarian will be able to help patrons with research, helping them to find information they need quickly. And in the era of Internet publishing where many sources are questionable, a librarian will be able to offer advice on which are credible.

A charter will make LCLC eligible for Tompkins County and New York State Income, and also make the library eligible for Federal and State grants that it does not qualify for now. It will be open for more hours than currently serviced by volunteers. An independent board of trustees, elected by the community will steer the library.

Nobody is predicting whether the community will agree to pay for the charter, but library officials are optimistic. They argue that the community is taking advantage of the benefits of the library, and the cost to taxpayers will be low not just now, but on an ongoing basis. They have been fiscally responsible since the library's inception, and have presented the community with a beautiful facility and resource. Library officials also argue that by chartering the local library Lansing money stays in Lansing, noting that the county library considered a Lansing tax not many years ago. Once LCLC is chartered, the county tax would not be possible.

Privately library officials worry that the two wells that have made their success possible are going to dry up. The first is the cadre of volunteers who have given countless hours of their time and skills. The second is the private donors who have paid for programs, expenses and two capital projects. If the charter is voted down, they fear that their ability to bring the level of services Lansing has become accustomed to may erode. Scott says that when you lose a volunteer you also lose the part of the library program that volunteer was passionate about. So a professional librarian will also provide stability to the programs and services the library is able to offer.

That doesn't mean that volunteers will not be needed. Scott says they will always be an important element, vital to the operation of the facility. "We need volunteers to do lots of things here that the librarian will help coordinate it all and that person will know all the different procedures," she says. "We've grown so much in six years. It's gotten complex and people want all of the regular library services that any library offers which these days is more complex due to the computers and the internet."

At another time the library board might have been able to rest on their laurels. But in this uncertain anti-tax environment they are planning a community outreach initiative to make their case. Chartering Committee Chair Debby Wells-Clinton and Scott started the ball rolling about two weeks ago by officially asking the Board of Education to put the charter proposition and candidates for a new board of directors on this May's school ballot, on which voters will also be asked to approve next year's school budget and elect two school board members.

Scott says they plan to distribute buttons and send mailings to district residents. "We are also going to have a few public meetings," she says. "We will present all this information that's in the brochure plus I'm working up a PowerPoint slide program with that and a little bit more information that answers questions we anticipate. It will have all this information especially about the tax stuff and the impact there. Also we will answer questions about why don't you stay with all volunteers or why move to this other system from an all volunteer system."

Wells-Clinton and Scott also attended a workshop in Albany Monday, hosted by the New York Library Association. Scott said they hoped to get more ideas about how to successfully get their message across to the community there.

Volunteers handed out a brochure about the charter at the grand re-opening that is still available at the library now. Another brochure will be arriving in voters' mailboxes shortly, and the group has two months to make their case. A library charter will annually cost the average taxpayer the equivalent cost of only one new book. On May 15 voters will determine whether they are willing to pay it.