

Library Vote Challenged

By Anthony Hall

It's a library. It educates the community. It educates kids. And the building is paid for, so the funds required are minimal — 15 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. Who could possibly have an argument with that?

In the Dec. 11 vote in Lansing, most didn't, as 1,307 turned out to vote with 686 votes approving a new tax that would establish a new Lansing library. The vote, if it stands, upgraded the status of the volunteer-run reading room that was established seven years ago in the old Lansing Town Hall.

For the Lansing Library Committee and many in favor of the project, the vote was a no-brainer. "It's nothing but good stuff as far as I can see," said committee member Donna Scott after the balloting, reacting to news that the vote would be challenged by a local group that finds fault in the Department of Education election laws and is looking for a technicality that could negate the results.

Dan Pace, a spokesman for the group, says they are looking for irregular addresses, especially for people who signed in but do not live in the Lansing School District, which defined the boundaries of eligible voters. But what

triggered the challenge is more of a reaction than a particular technicality. While school district votes allow for non-registered voters to sigh in and participate — as long as they live in the district — the challengers were upset that local voters had turned down the library in May, only to find themselves presented with the issue a second time. "What triggered [the challenge] is that the vote was defeated the first

time, back in May," Pace says. "We defeated it as a community and for some reason they felt they had a right to put the vote up a second time, when the people already said no."

According to Pace, some residents point out that the reading room was presented with the promise that it remain a volunteer organization. "They said it would not be a burden on local taxes," Pace says.

Pace presented his argu-

ment to the Lansing School District Board of Education in their Dec. 17 meeting. Under section 310 of the Department of Education election laws, an challenges must be submitted to the school, the library committee and the commissioner of the Department of Education by Jan. 10. They needed 67 signatures on a petition to do so and collected 150, Pace says.

The easy yes vote, supporting a reading room that has flourished and expanded over the years, was not so simple for others. For some, the vote was of a symbol of new taxes, which Pace says are already a burden to Lansing residents. To others the vote presses local farmers to sell land to developers, rather than raising crops.

"You can't have it both ways," says Dryden resident Tom Hatfield, who grew up on a dairy farm in Lansing and wrote a letter to the local daily newspaper explaining his opposition to the library measure.

Although both families might use local services with similar frequency — fire, ambulance, police or libraries — new taxes mean less to someone with a \$100,000 home than they do to a farmer with substantial land holdings and a huge capital investment. New taxes unfairly burden a



Photo by Kathy Morris

MEDITATIVE CELEBRATION: Accompanied by quiet music, visitors at the First Baptist Church on Court Street in Ithaca on New Year's Eve walk the labyrinth laid out on the carpeted floor of the church sanctuary. The original idea for the labyrinth (which takes four to five hours to lay out with masking tape) began with Liz Wilkinson, Alice Damp and Kris Scott seven years ago. This year's design is a replica of the floor of Chartres Cathedral.

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farmer, Hatfield says, cutting directly into the local sentiment that Tompkins County residents want to see the areas rural character preserved.

New taxes, he says, press the farmer to sell land. "My grandfather observed it should take 10 acres of wheat to pay your property taxes. Now it takes at least 50 acres of wheat to pay the same property taxes."

Pace notes that the area already has enough libraries, citing local schools and the Tompkins County Public Library in Ithaca.

Members of the local library committee, meanwhile, are pressing forward with projects including an upgrade of the computer system, which was subsidized by a grant of \$20,000 from the Triad Foundation that became available once the vote was official.

Committee member Marlaine Darfler concedes that the election rules are outdated. "I agree that it's a silly system," she says, adding that the committee followed the rules to the letter and has no choice but to move forward.

Scott says the challenge includes a complaint that seven yes votes shouldn't have counted since the voters live outside the school district. The district boundaries can be confusing, including parts of Groton, Locke, the Village of Lansing and the Town of Ithaca. Still, there were only seven discrepancies within a margin of 65 votes, Scott says, leaving the library enough votes to spare. Further, she says, "We made no attempt whatsoever to target non-residents [to vote]."