

Public Testimony's Clout

Mayor Kathy Hicks
City of Walnut Creek

In California, public libraries have long been neglected and under-funded. With Proposition 81's failure and reduced state library funding, it is increasingly challenging to find scarce resources to invest in libraries. As Dr. Seuss said, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it's not."

Elected officials don't make decisions in a vacuum. As part of our democratic way of life, public input and discourse is very important. The strong voices of library advocates can make a difference in the decisions of elected officials. Make your voices heard.

As a Mayor of the City of Walnut Creek, I have worked with our community for over a decade for a new library, improved library hours and programs. The City and library advocates have worked tirelessly to find resources to build a new library. Our state library grant application received the highest ranking and we optimistically hoped for a grant. Funding ran out. We worked hard for Prop.81. It sadly failed. Somehow, we had to find local resources to build our library.

Recently, our City Council held a special meeting to make tough budget decisions. Could we find a way to allocate millions of dollars of our General Fund discretionary funds towards our desperately needed library? With Proposition 81's failure, this became a critical decision.

As the meeting began, I saw the City Council chamber packed with people, with standing room only. I looked with concern at the anti-library faces in the crowd. These citizens represent competing interests and oppose local funds spent on a new library. Just remodel the old library, they suggest, not considering that our old library was built a half century ago, for a town 70% smaller, and has seismic, energy and ADA deficiencies.

Then, I realized that there were many more library "friendly" faces in the crowd. I saw members of the county-wide Library Commission, Friends of the Library, Library Foundation, local library bond committee, and professional librarians. I saw business and school leaders.

Suddenly, I felt uplifted. The presence and factual testimony of so many library supporters gave me and the city council the strength and inspiration to move forward with the difficult library funding decisions. The City Council voted to invest in a modern library that will benefit the community for generations to come.

The staunch determination of the City Council to forge ahead to build our new library was strengthened by informed, organized public testimony from library advocates. Their input gave Council Members the ability to make an informed decision. Their presence and positive public comments effectively counter balanced the negative voices.

The secret to success in library advocacy is persistence, patience and planning. You've got to be prepared and show up. And keep showing up.

Each library advocate is the power of one. When each one participates in public input, together, you can make a difference.