CONTRA COSTA COUNTY LIBRARY COMMISSION
AGENDA ATTACHMENT 7

MEETING DATE: Thursday, July 28, 2011
AGENDA ITEM #: 12 B
ITEM: FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY BLUE BOOK BINS

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Commissioners will consider Friends of the Library's concerns and discuss continued support for the local libraries by bringing your used books to the Friends of the Libraries.
Libraries and blue book bins

Friends of the Orinda Library history

The FOL started as the Orinda Library Board, in 1956. The group raised $115,000 to build Orinda’s first library. The FOL owned that library.

The Friends have therefore been collecting and selling used books to support the library for over 50 years. For all that time, there has been a consistent message: bring your used books to the library.

Beginning in 1998, the Friends raised more than $5 million in donations to build the new Orinda Library, which opened in October 2001. The Friends also own the new library. The new library included a convenient book donation drop-off room located in the library garage, a larger sorting room for donated books, and a Friends Bookshop in order to help raise money for library materials. The work of collecting, sorting, and selling the books is all done by volunteers, so 100% of the proceeds go to the library or other charities. Sales of used books by Friends groups around the Bay Area and the country are the lifeblood of libraries’ ability to purchase new books and materials.

Since 1997, the Orinda Friends have raised over $925,000 for library materials. These books and materials circulate to all libraries in the county.

The Friends donate unsold books to a number of local charities, including schools in other Contra Costa County cities, Goodwill, St. Vincent de Paul, local residents who send books to third world countries, and so on. The only books recycled are those in extremely poor condition.

The FOL, and other Friends groups, are the main source of funding for library materials in Contra Costa County. For example, the county’s materials budget for the Orinda branch for fiscal year 2011-2012 is expected to be $16,000. FOL will contribute more than $80,000.

The FOL is able to tap the resources of our community (used books) and use them to provide library materials for every resident of Contra Costa County. This is vital to our mission to support our library system.

The blue book bins

This spring, blue book bins with “Books for Charity” signs appeared in Safeway parking lots throughout Contra Costa County and the rest of the Bay Area. These bins were placed not by Safeway, but by Thrift Recycling Management (TRM), a for-profit company based in Lakewood, Washington.

TRM first placed these bins in Oregon and Washington. They have devastated book donations to Friends’ groups there, and library funding has suffered in those states as a result.

According to a story in the Tacoma, Washington News Tribune on April 14th, TRM announced that it was preparing to “place its first 450 bins in California—beginning in the Bay Area—with 150 going into Safeway parking lots.” The company CEO is quoted as saying, “We expect, in the next year, to be getting serious about California.”
According to a TRM press release from November 2008, “TRM carries an inventory of nearly two million books for sale online at all times.”

TRM sorts the donated books. Some, 25% or fewer, are given to charity. Half are pulped. The remaining 25% are sold online by TRM, which has annual sales of $26 million, according to the company’s website. In a Wired magazine story, TRM says it is the world’s largest seller of used books.

TRM created a charity, Reading Tree, to function as the charity arm to give books to schools. Several TRM executives are on Reading Tree’s board, and the TRM president is also the president of Reading Tree. The Charities Division of the Oregon Department of Justice is investigating the relationship between TRM and Reading Tree.

Safeway stores in the Bay Area say that they are not dealing with TRM or Reading Tree, although it is clear that TRM placed the bins and has a warehouse in Benicia. Safeway has offered to give the books in the bins to Friends groups. However, this would mean that Friends volunteers, most of whom are seniors, would have to pick up the books from Safeway, put them in their own cars, and haul them to the library. This presents serious health and safety risks to our volunteers. Books would also be damaged by being dropped into the bins. There is no guarantee that Safeway’s offer would continue indefinitely. Once people get used to dropping books at Safeway, they may not use the library donation room. Already, children’s book donations to the Friends have dropped dramatically.

The bins seriously erode the efforts of our local libraries to provide access to books for children in need throughout the Bay Area.

It is not clear what the relationship is between Safeway, Reading Tree, and Thrift Recycling Management. It is not clear why Safeway has installed these donation bins, apparently without being aware of the existence of Friends of the Library groups and how important they are to library funding, especially after our libraries have suffered a decade of devastating funding cuts. It is not clear why Safeway is offering to let Friends groups have books from their bins, but is unwilling to remove the bins altogether and let Friends groups continue collecting books as they have for decades.

Used books are the lifeblood of Friends groups and library funding around the Bay Area, and indeed the whole country. We do not understand why a large corporation is suddenly imposing itself into our established way of supporting our beloved libraries. No clear explanation has yet been given.

Please continue to support our local libraries by bringing your used books to the Friends’ donation room. The FOL’s donation room is located in the garage under the library, at the far end on the left. We greatly appreciate your help!