

# Library lovers toss the book at Alameda County's disposal system

By Chip Johnson

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Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle  
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Dorothea Dorenz walks into the science area of the Fremont main library with lots of shelf space Thursday April 23, 2015. Dorothea Dorenz and others are on a crusade to halt the Alameda County library system practice of tossing out old books, almost 400,000 of them since 2013.

The idea that a public library system would toss out hundreds of thousands of books without rhyme or reason just doesn't sound right.

But that's what appears to have happened in Alameda County's 10-branch library system over the past two years. Watchdog activists believe the library has discarded almost 400,000 books from its shelves. County officials contend that the number is closer to

172,000 books, and they say many of these books are passed to friend-of-library groups for sales or are recycled.

When users in Albany learned that thousands of books were tossed from that library branch over a two-year period, the county library system had some explaining to do.

“The librarians are now choosing for us what we should read, and they say only newer books,” said Dorothea Dorenz, 67, a retired art teacher, voracious reader and library user who has taken up the cause.

“We’ve lost the main role of the library: to educate the general public. Now they decide for us,” she added.

Dorenz is a member of a group called the Library Book Savers of Alameda County and has been crusading ever since. The group has managed to persuade county officials to place a moratorium on book disposals while its policies are under review.

But county officials have defended their actions in public meetings and media interviews, saying the practice of weeding out older, damaged, outdated or unpopular books in favor of more “popular and appealing new materials” is a common practice at libraries. County officials follow a philosophy of a “living library,” a mix of new titles and classic books, with an annual paring-down of outdated items.

The issue Dorenz and like-minded supporters have with the county library system is that there appears to be no record-keeping of what’s been tossed out — and county officials have taken extraordinary measures to keep those decisions private.

The library policy made so little sense to some staff librarians that they began rescuing books headed for apparent recycling outside the county library’s headquarters in Fremont.

“We have people at various branches who send us photos of the books they have rescued from the Dumpster bin,” Dorenz said. “They threw out a biography of Willie Mays” from 2010.

### **Placing locks on bins**

When library administrators caught a whiff of those workers' actions, they promptly built a fence and placed locks on all the bins outside, Dorenz said.

The library's policies have been supported by Scott Haggerty, president of the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, who told Dorenz at a recent board meeting that he was aware and approved of the system in place, she said.

When Dorenz asked about maintaining books for the purposes of academic research, she said she was told by deputy county librarian Cindy Chadwick that was what university libraries are for.

### **'Enlightened clientele'**

Unfortunately, Haggerty's opinion seems to differ from the board's approved policies.

A 1999 county policy states that, "The library does not try to determine what the public should read, hear or view nor does it select materials as if granting a seal of merit, rather it attempts to meet the needs of an inquisitive, enlightened clientele."

The county needs to seek a solution to a policy error that allows for no public input and could actually cost residents knowledge that's been built up over the decades.

For now, the library is promising to change its ways, in part by establishing a priority list for discarded materials to be offered to a greater number of community groups and charities before being recycled and holding an annual public sale to offer the books to the public first.

But the last thing that many people want to hear, especially Baby Boomers who straddle the line between the days of library research and Internet accessibility, is that some of the same books that defined our past and taught us to comprehend, think and dream for ourselves no longer have a practical use or appeal.

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