

A sad chapter for libraries

Some cities struggle with lack of money

By Jeanne Schinto

LAWRENCE — A few years ago, the staff of the Lawrence Public Library started seeing John Updike at their reading tables. He would stay for hours, browsing, reading, writing. Why in the world? He lives in posh Beverly Farms some 20 miles away, with a far more enticing library than our own in this old mill city.

The famous man of letters was asked if he did, indeed, frequent Lawrence's humble house of books.

Yes, he replied via a densely typed postcard: "I can be found there every six months or so, for the following mundane reason: my wife and I own an Audi bought at Park-Audi, and I can think of no better or more useful place to kill the time while it's being mended and checked by them than the Lawrence Library, which I find as good a place to work in as most, if you can stay away from the Joyce Carol Oates shelf and don't mind a lot of kids around you gossiping in Spanish. I hear America singing, in the Lawrence library above all. Best wishes, John U."

Yet the public library as an American fact of life — a storehouse of knowledge with free and equal access to all, where scholars (and Updikes) rub shoulders with the self-taught — is being threatened in Lawrence. In many ways, it can be seen as an example of the situation faced by the libraries of many depressed communities in the commonwealth. The financing of Lawrence's library is dependent, like that of its schools, on local property taxes. And where tax rates are sharply limited and real estate values low, you also will find library buildings crumbling; staff and hours cut; no new books.

When Joseph R. Dionne, the library's director, found himself without a book budget in three of the last four fiscal years, he raised private money to pay for new volumes. But Dionne doesn't think that is a wise stopgap measure. He calls his successful solicitation "a dangerous bit of business," and resorted to it only after having "fought the good fight" with the City Council.

Dionne's fear is that city leadership may forget how vital a municipal department the library is, or that its obligation to the library is as crucial as it is to fire and police. He worries, too, that city leaders may grow to expect all library financing to be philanthropic — a difficult, if not impossible, fundraising task.

The other problem with letting the city slip on its duty to the library is that it jeopardizes another source of money: the state. By failing to restock its shelves, for example, Lawrence puts itself in danger of forfeiting \$35,000 to which it's entitled through the Library Incentive Grant Program adminis-

tered by the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. Under that mandate, the library receives 50 cents per capita, provided it meets certain standards designed to encourage optimal library service. Among them is the stipulation that 12 percent of the library's budget goes for books.

Currently, Lawrence still gets the grant, because the law provides waivers to libraries that demonstrate fiscal hardship and the MBLC allows prorating in certain cases. They've allowed it for Lawrence, even though the library doesn't conform to another standard, either, which holds that a library in a city of its size be open 63 hours weekly, and Lawrence's is open only 50. In fact, of 321 municipalities in Massachusetts that applied for these grants, 74 have either a waiver, a pro rata arrangement or both.

The irony, of course, is that those most in need of the money aren't likely to meet the standards.

In 1986, the Legislature tried to redress that incongruity by passing the Municipal Equalization Grant, which carries with it consideration for conditions in the community. Per capita income is one; equalized valuation is another — that is, the total amount of taxable property divided by the population. And so Lawrence receives another \$54,000, based on a formula using those factors.

Still, the measures aren't nearly enough. Lawrence is home to a very expensive group of library patrons. Many are immigrants with few dollars to spend on books of their own (perhaps as a reflection of that, Lawrence hasn't a single bookstore). So their dependency on a lending library is critical.

What is more, they usually go to the library not in search of the latest Updike (most of them wouldn't — and don't — recognize the author in their midst), but to use far costlier textbook and research items. That's because the city's schools are themselves book-starved and many adults are enrolled in literacy programs or classes for their general equivalency diploma.

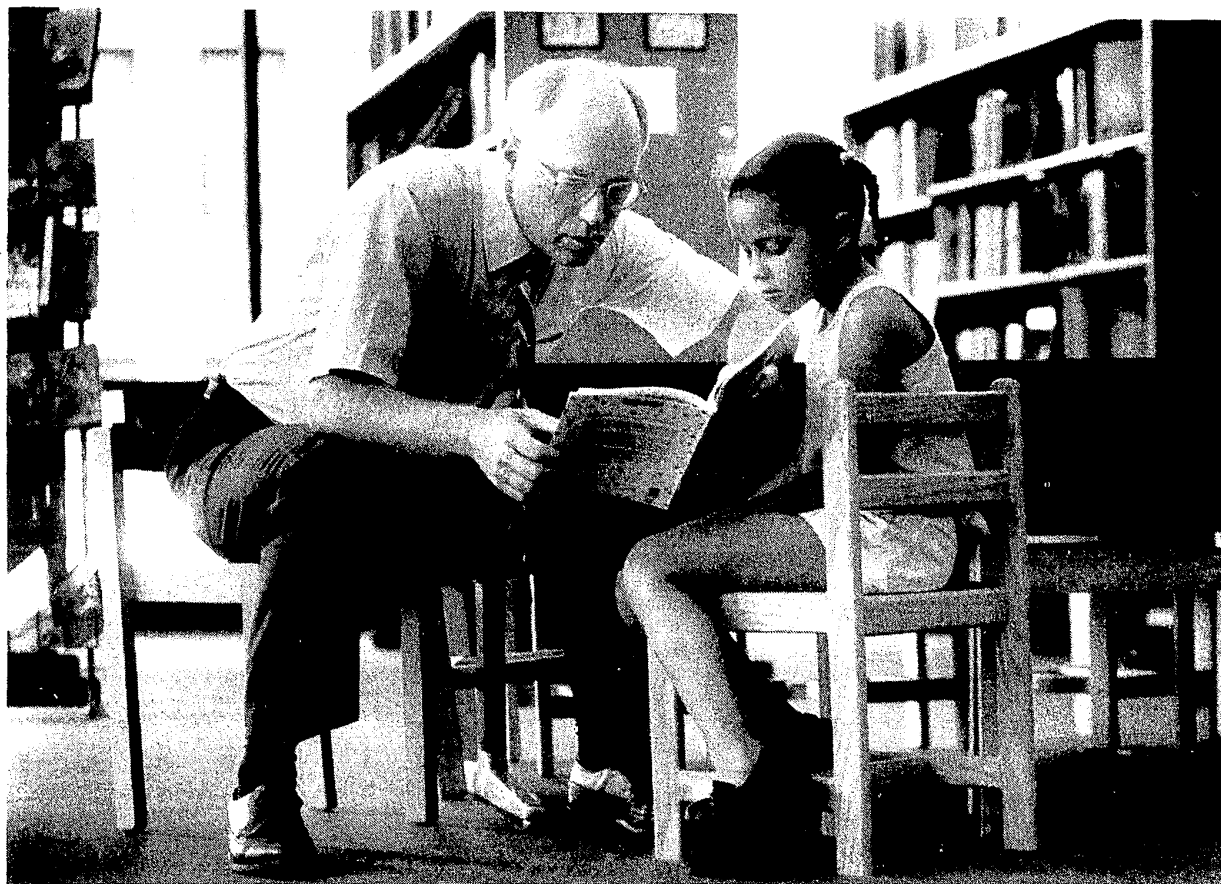
The library also serves a multitude of students from the Lawrence campus of Northern Essex Community College; in fact, between 1985 and 1990, that "campus" was on the library's third floor.

Its contacts with young people are perhaps its most consequential. "Half our business is schoolchildren," says Dionne. "We move thousands of kids through here every year, so they know how to use the library and bring their parents in later." Indeed, he says he sometimes feels like part of the School Department, and thinks someday there will be closer ties, perhaps actual mergers in some communities.

Regionalization — a blurring of another sort of bureaucratic boundary — is a concept taxpayers traditionally resist for schools, public safety departments and other municipal offices. But libraries in the commonwealth began regionalizing nearly 30 years ago, and it's made them by turns more equitable and more efficient.

To wit: the Interlibrary Loan System of the Eastern Massachusetts Regional Library System gives Lawrence library patrons access to books and other materials owned by 200 libraries in the East (and far beyond, if a further search is necessary). The wait is sometimes weeks for a title, especially if it's out of print or obscure. Still, the delivery system does a stellar job routing 1.5 million items yearly.

Book purchasing is another task ready-made for the regional approach, so libraries



Joseph R. Dionne, director of the Lawrence Public Library, reads to Norma Castillo, 6, on Wednesday.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOANN RATHÉ

not only get the best prices, but don't duplicate paperwork. Actually, that chore is being handled by the Western regional office for the whole state.

Regional electronic book cataloging is starting to happen in the Greater Lawrence area and beyond, not through the regional system but through the Merrimack Valley Library Consortium, a private nonprofit cooperative with 26 members. (Further, anyone with a card from one consortium library may use any of the others — a sort of do-it-yourself interlibrary loan; this benefit presumes, however, that a patron has transportation.)

Dionne attends the consortium's bi-monthly meetings to brainstorm with other directors who find themselves comparably squeezed or, conversely, positioned to help. Wistfully, he intones the names of well-heeled communities — neighboring Andover among them — whose libraries, as do their schools, stand in sharp contrast to Lawrence's.

"Libraries, like so much else, thrive where there is a high degree of educational attainment and personal earnings, because those people understand the benefit, the great return on their investment — as our forefathers did," Dionne says. "Coming together to acquire items that none of us could afford and then making them available to everybody so that we all can improve our lives is such a fundamental concept."

Fundamental it may be; universal it isn't. "People still come to the front desk asking, 'How much does it cost to belong?'" Dionne marvels. "Remember, there are different cultural traditions. And in some places where our customers have come from, there are no free libraries. Or there are libraries

run by churches, or by government agencies for the use of the in-group. But there isn't that same access."

Access is exactly what Dionne hopes to promote and preserve. But he obviously needs help. If information is central to freedom, and if local taxes cannot provide it, then as long as we continue to heroically accept immigrants, we need just as heroically

not the real exploiters, the powerful and the rich, but the middle class, the modest planners, the savers for a comfortable and independent retirement who suffer under measures meant to spread wealth and extend justice?"

This passage (and no other) was underlined in Andover's copy of Nadine Gordimer's collection of short stories "Something Out There."

It's a justifiable sentiment. But the reality is, the middle class will suffer more if it neglects to educate the poor. That goes, too, for neglect of the university of the self-educated: the library.

"Self-education happens here every day," Dionne asserts. "We've had guys come in to look into the whole business of upholstery repair. A friend of the custodian was doing woodworking and came in to look at chair designs."

It was business as usual of another kind one day this summer when, in the library auditorium, 258 giggling schoolchildren sat crosslegged on the floor; they were being entertained by Opera-To-Go, a nonprofit arts education performance group, with a strong audience-participation component.

America was singing at the library that day, all right, Mr. Updike.

Meanwhile, out in the lobby, a small-scale (8-foot-tall) model of the Statue of Liberty greeted any and all others who entered the portals.

Jeanne Schinto is the author of two books of fiction; her first book-length nonfiction, "Huddle Fever," about life and work in Lawrence, will be published by Knopf.

Where tax rates are sharply limited and real estate values low, you also will find library buildings crumbling; staff and hours cut; no new books.

to aid the communities where they settle.

We need to extend good public services to everyone no matter where in the democracy they happen to live.

That's a fundamental concept, too; yet, like certain school improvements, it fosters adamant resistance.

"Doesn't everyone over 40 know that it is

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