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San Francisco Law Library at a Crossroads

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The San Francisco Law Library now faces its greatest challenge since the earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed the library's collection. Established by an act of the California legislature in 1865, the library shortly thereafter became a public law library dedicated to serve members of the bar, the judiciary, and the public. Currently, the law library has three locations: the Civic Center Library (formerly at City Hall) in the Veterans' War Memorial Building, the Financial District branch at 685 Market Street (in the Monadnock Building), and the Reference Room at the new Civic Center Courthouse. The library's current challenge has been precipitated by drastic space problems.

The Civic Center branch of the San Francisco Law Library had been at City Hall since its opening in 1914. When City Hall closed for the earthquake retrofit in 1995, the Law Library had to make do with temporary, makeshift quarters in the War Memorial Veterans' Building across the street. The basics of the Library were moved into some of the space evacuated by the Museum of Modern Art, but two thirds of the collection – those parts of less common usage – were placed into inaccessible storage. The Law Library did not return to City Hall when it reopened in 1999. Still "temporarily" in the Veteran's Building, the Civic Center Library operates with severely limited shelf space for growth of the ongoing collection, little room for patrons and staff, and no way to get to its stored materials.

The City Charter requires the City and County of San Francisco to provide "suitable and sufficient quarters for the Law Library, fix up and furnish the same... [and that] the Library shall be so located as to be readily accessible to the judges and officers of the courts." Accordingly, the City has promised the Law Library space in a new building to be constructed within the next three or four years. However, there is no certainty that the project will move forward without further delays, or *that the Law Library will be provided the space it requires to house its collection and to serve its patrons even if it does get into the building.*

The Law Library's downtown Branch was first opened in the late 1940's and has existed continuously for decades at the Mills Building and since 1987 at the Monadnock Building. It is open nights and weekends and has heavy traffic from lawyers, law students and the general public. This is a commercial space located in the heart of San Francisco's office area. The building managers have made it clear that when the Branch Library's lease expires in July 2002, it will not lease the space to the Law Library at less than astronomically high market rates. Law Library operations are funded primarily from civil filing fees (not tax revenues) and the Law Library simply does not have the resources to afford today's market rents. It appears the Branch Library will have to close when the lease expires, and its patrons will have to use the Civic Center Library (which will then provide evening and weekend hours), despite the additional strains on the Law Library's small, temporary Veterans' Building facility.

Having been physically separated from the courts for the first time in nearly 100 years, the Law Library also opened a small "reference room" to serve attorneys and the public at the

courthouse. Unfortunately, the new courthouse did not have sufficient room to house the full, permanent Law Library.

Besides serving large and medium-size law firms, the Law Library provides valuable services to solo and small firm practitioners, who are less likely to have law libraries or expensive electronic resources in their offices. Surveys taken in October indicate that 650 patrons visit the Law Library each week, especially small firm practitioners and members of the general public. Public law libraries serve to bridge the gap between the electronic "haves" and "have nots." These groups, as well as the larger law firms, will be adversely affected if the Law Library's space crisis is not favorably resolved.

The City's plans to construct a new civic building are expected to move forward early in 2001. There will be considerable competition among City departments for space in the new civic building. Support and advocacy by the Library's users, members of the legal community, and law librarians will significantly aid the Library in its efforts to obtain the space it needs in the new building. The Library's 1994 space needs assessment determined that the Library would need 36,000 net sq. ft. to maintain the Library to the year 2010. Given the size of comparable libraries, this is a very modest figure. City officials and others frequently make the assumption that the Library's need for space will be significantly reduced by reliance on a "virtual library" rather than hard copy books. However, the virtual library is not yet a replacement for hard copy books and may never fully replace them, particularly in public law libraries. (See, *Crisis at the San Francisco Law Library*, in the Bar Association of San Francisco's magazine, *San Francisco Attorney*, October/November 2000.)

The Law Library would appreciate letters of support from law librarians and their firms or organizations for use in negotiations for building space. Law librarians are particularly knowledgeable about issues that will affect the space allocation decision such as the "virtual versus paper library" in the public law library setting, the need to retain archival material and to access the currently stored collection, and equal access to legal information.

Librarians, law firms, attorneys and others who would like to help the Law Library are welcome to send resolutions or letters of support to The San Francisco Law Library Board of Trustees, 401 Van Ness Avenue, Room 400, San Francisco, California 94102, or to contact the law librarian, Marcia R. Bell, at this address or email her at marcia_bell@ci.sf.ca.us. For future updates and announcements about the Law Library, please see the Library's web page at www.ci.sf.ca.us/sfil.