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## **As We See It: Vote yes on Measure R library tax**

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The Santa Cruz County libraries are healthy and growing in terms of usefulness and community services.

Voters can and should keep the library systems in Santa Cruz and the county along with the separate Watsonville system strong by approving Measure R on the June 3 ballot.

The measure would extend an existing quarter-cent sales tax increase that voters approved by more than the required two-thirds majority in 1996. That tax, which raises more than \$8.3 million a year, is due to expire in 2013. Measure R would make the quarter cent a permanent bump in the sales tax we pay for purchases in Santa Cruz County.

So, why not wait until 2012 to ask voters again about funding libraries through the sales-tax increase?

The answer to that lies within the extensive reach and outreach of both the 10-site Santa Cruz library system and Watsonville's two libraries, including the new Civic Center library, which just opened this month.

For Watsonville, the sales tax increase provides more than 80 percent of the system's operating revenues. For the Santa Cruz city-county system, the tax provided nearly \$6.6 million of its nearly \$12.2 million in revenues.

Voters and library patrons might not remember what it was like before the 1996 sales tax was approved -- with state cutbacks in funding to local cities and counties, which provided almost all library funding, local libraries were cutting back hours and days, book budgets

were cut and employee salaries were stagnant. Since the tax was approved, many public libraries in other cities and counties -- such as Salinas -- have either closed or vastly curtailed services.

Today, the libraries in our county are much healthier -- and have used the funds from the tax to expand services. Libraries today incorporate so much more than just "bricks and mortar" buildings, offering a variety of digital media services, electronic databases, literacy programs, mobile book programs and book clubs. A popular new branch has opened in Live Oak, paid for by redevelopment funds, while the sales-tax revenue provided the money for staffing. Plans for a Felton library will require funding sources to pay for the building; the library tax revenue would go to pay for staff and services.

Within library buildings themselves, banks of computers are in constant use by students and researchers, many of whom may not have high-speed Internet access at home.

Extending the existing tax will allow the Santa Cruz city-county

system and Watsonville to plan for the future, for a time already arriving when the public library system is a citadel of not just the printed word, but a vast network of electronic archives and databases, providing access to a vast array of knowledge, educational opportunities and even entertainment.

For all that, voters are asked to approve an extension of an existing sales tax.

It's a good deal -- now and for future generations.

Vote yes on Measure R on June 3.