

Port Orford's new library, built with donations

Margie Boule tells a true-life page-turner about a little Oregon coast town that could

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What the folks in Port Orford have done is amazing. In fact, if any other town or city in Oregon -- heck, in the country -- has done it in recent memory, we haven't heard about it.

First, they passed a library bond measure for \$450,000. Yes, one of those double-majority elections in which you need a high voter turnout as well as a majority of "yes" votes. And they passed it in an area where a big piece of the community lives at the poverty or low-income level, in a town that's had more than its share of hard times lately.

That was tough enough. But then came the amazing part: This little cash-strapped town got together and privately raised a huge amount of money for that new library. Led by Tobe Porter, director of the library, people collected cans, had a sheep show, sold Christmas trees and baked goods, threw a burrito breakfast and a chicken feed, auctioned off an afghan . . . well, you get the idea. They worked hard for six years raising funds for their library.

And then they built it. And when they were done, about two weeks ago, done on time and on budget, they had not used one penny of the library bond measure.

Not one penny.

In fact, they had \$1,541 left over from money they'd raised.

Now, lots of people sponsoring bond measures say things like, "We'll try not to use all of it," or, "We'll cut costs if we can."

But to be given permission by the public to use \$450,000 in public money, and then not use a penny? Has anybody ever heard of such a thing?

Tobe Porter insists the people of Port Orford should get the credit, but most folks in town say the library wouldn't have been built without Tobe.

And it's not the first time she's built a library in their neck of the woods.

Tobe and her husband, Jon Porter, moved to the southern Oregon coast in 1991. Tobe became director of the 868-square-foot library in Langlois, housed in a room next to the fire department.

In 2002, doors opened on a new building, with 15,000 books inside. Tobe and volunteers had raised all the money.

Tobe moved on to become the director of the Port Orford library. It, too, was in cramped quarters, in a building that also housed city offices, the police and the municipal court. "There was no room to put books, so we couldn't even spend the whole book budget," Tobe says.

Clearly, the town needed a new library. That was OK with Tobe. "I found I missed the excitement and challenge of raising money," she says.

Yes, she actually said that.

"We were very fortunate," Tobe says, "because a couple donated property right on (Oregon) 101. Then a very kind gentleman left half his estate when he died, about \$85,000. That kicked us into high gear."

What followed was "years of one fundraising activity after another, locally," Tobe says. In that poverty-stricken community, "we raised over \$750,000 for a \$2 million project.

"For me, that's what this was all about. It's phenomenal, awesome, humbling. It's all the adjectives you could think of."

Tobe applied for federal, state and private grants. She spent long hours filling out applications. The federal grant took "an enormous amount of paperwork. Two feet of paperwork."

They got that grant, and many others. Tobe even called a billionaire in California who'd never been to Port Orford and persuaded him to give \$15,000.

"But the largest single chunk came from the community."

When they thought they had enough, "We went out to bid. And we did not receive a single bid we could afford."

That's when the library board went to the public, in 2007, and asked it to pass a bond measure for \$450,000.

Tobe believes it passed "because folks really wanted a library" and because "we told them we were sure we could do it for a lesser amount and we would do all we could not to issue the bond at all. And they believed us."

A month after the measure passed, "We were opening new bids. And we got a great one."

DLB Construction Inc. out of Coos Bay "had excellent references."

The moment they accepted the bid, "We started fundraising again," Tobe says. "In fact, we never stopped."

She wrote more grant proposals. "It was easier to raise money for furniture than for shelving," she found. "Buying metal shelving is like buying underwear. Nobody wants to buy it, but we really need it."

In late May, "My colleague who has kept track of every single penny . . . looked at me and said, . . . 'We don't need any more money.' " The women realized they would not need to issue the bond voters had approved. "We both started crying."

The new library's grand opening was Saturday. More than 500 people came through. The public art was in place. There was room for all the books on the new shelves.

Tobe told the crowd, "We did this together."

Tobe and Jon, her husband, who's head of the library board, have no plans to build another library. "We've promised ourselves," she says. She looks forward to "just being a library director.

"But then every once in a while we say, 'Yeah, but what about. . . .'"

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