



TERRA LAWSON-REMER

VICE-CHAIR

SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: August 27, 2024

18

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**PROTECT THE FREEDOM OF SAN DIEGO COUNTY RESIDENTS TO READ
“CHALLENGED & BANNED BOOKS” AT THEIR LOCAL COUNTY LIBRARIES
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

Over the last four years, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors has stood as a steadfast guardian of our community’s shared values and rights, such as reproductive freedom, declaring racism a public health crisis, and uplifting the LGBTQIA+ community countywide. These actions reflect our collective commitment to equity, justice, and progress.

In recent years, a dangerous trend has emerged across the United States—a calculated effort by certain groups to censor books and suppress diverse voices under the guise of “protecting” society. This escalating movement to ban books poses a direct threat to our fundamental freedoms and undermines the principles of intellectual freedom. The latest challenge we face is an attempt to censor literature, and it is imperative to ensure that all 33 County of San Diego Libraries are safe havens where everyone in our communities can freely access challenged and banned books.

Book bans are not about shielding people from harm, they are about controlling the narrative. Certain groups have increasingly targeted literature that challenges their narrow worldview, particularly focusing on banning books that amplify the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQIA+ communities. The American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom reported a staggering 4,240 unique book titles were targeted for censorship in 2023 alone. Nearly half of these books, [47%](#), explore themes central to the lived experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals. This is not a coincidence; it is a concerted effort to erase these voices from our public spaces.

For instance, in Florida, the Lake County School Board [banned *And Tango Makes Three*](#), a story about two male penguins raising a chick, because it depicted a same-sex relationship. Even Florida’s own governor, [Ron DeSantis, had to backtrack](#) on his book ban policies earlier this year

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after school districts went too far in removing titles from classrooms. The impact of these bans extends far beyond Florida. In July, Utah banned [13 books](#) from public schools and libraries, including works by beloved author Judy Blume. In Missouri, Tennessee, and other states, similar laws are being passed, effectively restricting the availability of books that challenge their preferred ideologies. The result is a homogenized, sanitized environment where only select viewpoints are deemed acceptable.

San Diego county is not immune to these challenges. In June 2023, City of San Diego Public Library the Rancho Peñasquitos’ branch became the target of protests when all LGBTQIA+ books were checked out by individuals threatening to not return them unless the library removed these so-called, “offensive” titles permanently. This act of intimidation is part of a growing trend where certain groups are attempting to impose their narrow worldview on our communities, stifling the free exchange of ideas. The County of San Diego needs to set a strong example for other regions, showcasing our dedication to protecting the freedom to read and safeguarding access to diverse literature in the San Diego County Libraries.

The diversity of ideas presented in literature is essential for fostering empathy, understanding, and progress. When we allow the censorship of books, we risk creating a monolithic society where only select viewpoints are considered acceptable, thereby limiting educational opportunities for discussion and exploration.

To uphold the County of San Diego’s commitment to free expression and establish San Diego County as a haven of intellectual freedom, it is imperative to ensure all 33 County of San Diego Libraries are places where people across our communities can easily access “challenged and banned books.” From Solana Beach and Encinitas to El Cajon, Alpine and Bonita, every resident deserves the ability to access literature that promotes an open society where critical thinking and diverse perspectives are essential for both personal and community advancement.

Today’s item aims to gain the County’s official support for California Assembly Bill (AB) 1825 (Muratsuchi), Freedom to Read Act, consistent with Board Policy M-2, and ensure that the County of San Diego is a haven for intellectual freedom. This includes officially acknowledging National Banned Books Week, acquiring digital and hard copies of banned books, such as those listed in the American Library Association’s Top 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 2010-2019 for all San Diego County Libraries and exploring opportunities for additional funding to enhance public outreach aimed at increasing awareness of access to San Diego County Libraries and its resources.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

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1. Direct Chief Administrative Officer to express the County’s support for California Assembly Bill (AB) 1825, Freedom to Read Act, consistent with Board Policy M-2.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to recognize Banned Book Week at all San Diego County Libraries annually beginning the week of Sept. 22-28, 2024, and enshrine a permanent Banned Book Week at the County of San Diego which would annually

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recognize and celebrate Banned Book Week with a dedicated display aligning with other national banned book week efforts.

3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to acquire and make available hard and/or digital copies of banned books, such as those listed in the American Library Association’s Top 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 2010-2019 to ensure access at each San Diego County Library location.
4. Authorize the Chief Administrative Officer to explore additional funding opportunities and a public education campaign to increase awareness around banned and culturally inclusive books and library literature.
5. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to annually light up the County Administration Center blue, red and orange on the Monday of Banned Books Week.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reported that of the 4,240 unique book titles targeted for censorship 47% of them were titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGTBQIA+ and BIPOC individuals. Taking this action would enhance the quality of life of San Diego County residents by ensuring BIPOC and LGTBQIA+ are not underrepresented in our county libraries.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This proposed action supports the County of San Diego Sustainability Goals by actively combatting climate change by including access to digital copies of books and library materials.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-25 Operational Plan for the County Library. There will be no net change in General Fund and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the widespread banning of books in the United States has become a significant crisis, jeopardizing the core values of intellectual freedom and democratic integrity. This troubling trend towards censorship not only limits access to a diverse range of ideas but also undermines the quality of education by stifling opportunities for discussion and exploration. The persistence of this issue reflects a troubling erosion of our commitment to free expression, threatening the foundational values of an open society where critical thinking and diverse perspectives are crucial for both personal and community growth. To combat this crisis, it is essential to establish San

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Diego County as a beacon of intellectual freedom, protecting the right to information and nurturing a well-informed, inclusive democracy.

Book bans are not about shielding people from harm—they are about controlling the narrative. Certain groups have increasingly targeted literature that challenges their narrow worldview, particularly focusing on books that amplify the voices and experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities. The American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom reported a staggering 4,240 unique book titles were targeted for censorship in 2023 alone. Nearly half of these books, [47%](#), represent the lived experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ individuals. This is not a coincidence; it is a concerted effort to erase these voices from our public spaces.

Over the last year, the American Library Association reported a dramatic [65%](#) increase in challenges of unique book titles in 2023 compared to 2022. Among the ALA’s top 100 most frequently challenged books are

- Maya Angelou’s, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which has long been a focal point of controversy and censorship. The memoir’s cultural significance lies in its candid exploration of racial discrimination, sexual abuse, and the complexities of growing up Black in the segregated South. Angelou’s work not only illuminates her personal experiences but also resonates with the broader African American experience, giving voice to marginalized communities and highlighting the intersection of personal pain and collective strength. The ongoing bans and challenges reflect the persistent tension between the desire for open dialogue about difficult subjects and the impulse towards censorship. Despite these efforts to suppress it, the memoir remains a cornerstone of American literature, celebrated for its pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement and its enduring message of empowerment and perseverance.
- *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood has faced frequent challenges and bans due to its critique of religious extremism and provocative content. The novel holds significant cultural importance for its exploration of gender, power, and dystopian futures, offering a stark commentary on the dangers of authoritarianism and the fragility of women’s rights.
- Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* also provokes critical discussions about technology and societal control and has faced its own set of challenges.
- The *Goosebumps* series by R.L. Stine, known for its spooky and thrilling tales aimed at children, is another frequent entry on the ALA’s list of most challenged books.
- Matthew de la Peña’s *Mexican White Boy* draws on his experience growing up biracial here in San Diego. Tucson, Arizona lawmakers did not see it as a story of his childhood and firsthand experiences, but instead banned the book, claiming it violated regulations by incorporating critical race theory.

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The diversity of ideas presented in literature is essential for fostering empathy, understanding, and progress. When we allow the censorship of books, we risk creating a homogenized environment where only select viewpoints are considered acceptable, thereby limiting educational opportunities for discussion and exploration.

Actions across the nation to implement safeguards have already begun and it is the reason the County of San Diego should join the effort and commit to free expression and establish San Diego County as a haven of intellectual freedom and literature,

For example, in June of 2023, the state of Illinois signed HB 2789, The Library System Act, into law. This legislative bill aims to protect libraries’ right to acquire books without external limitation and prohibits the removal of books based solely on their content. The bill underscores the fundamental principle of intellectual freedom, creating educational environments that are not only inclusive, but also supportive of diverse perspectives, critical thinking, and ideas. In addition, it as protects its residents from the effects of censorship.

Also, in our own state, California Assembly Bill (AB) 1825, California Freedom to Read Act, is currently working its way through the legislative process. AB1825 aims to require each public library in the state that gets state funding (excluding school libraries) to create and make available a written policy for developing its collection. It also prevents library boards from banning or restricting the circulation of any materials based on their topics or the views, ideas, or opinions expressed in them.

Today’s action calls on the County of San Diego to uphold its commitment to free expression and establish San Diego County as a haven of intellectual freedom and ensure all 33 County of San Diego Libraries are places where people across our communities can easily access “challenged and banned books.” From Solana Beach and Encinitas to El Cajon, Alpine and Bonita, every resident deserves the ability to access literature that promotes an open society where critical thinking and diverse perspectives are essential for both personal and community advancement.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today’s proposed actions support the Community and Equity Initiatives in the County’s 2024-2029 Strategic Plan by providing proactive communication around materials that are accessible and transparent as well as reducing disparities and ensuring access to a diverse range of literature, library resources, and library information for all throughout San Diego County.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'A. J. ...', is written over a faint, illegible printed name.

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ATTACHMENT(S)

N/A