

Collier Now

LIBRARY SYSTEM

County ends ALA membership

By Aisling Swift

After 21 consecutive years, Collier County libraries are no longer part of the world's oldest and largest library association—following complaints by residents and groups that claimed it promoted drag queen story hours, pornography and LGBTQ books that groom impressionable children.

Ties severed after residents' claims of inappropriate books

County Commissioners voted unanimously on Oct. 10 to immediately sever ties with the 150-year-old American Library Association. Canceling ALA memberships is part of a national movement over book challenges and bans that heated up after Emily Drab-

inski, associate professor at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies, was elected ALA president in July.

When she celebrated that and mentioned in a tweet that she's a Marxist lesbian, it

prompted state libraries in Montana, Texas and Missouri to sever ties with the ALA, which provides grants, education, training and materials to libraries. Other governments followed, including Florida's Citrus and Hernando counties, and more are considering it.

At the board meeting, Jamie Merchant of

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THE SHELTER FOR ABUSED WOMEN & CHILDREN

Helping hands to prevent violence



Hands are for Helping not for Hurting is an interactive program required for all Collier County first grade students. Contributed

By Elizabeth Kellar

Abuse can take many forms—physical, emotional and even digital.

Anti-domestic violence advocates agree that learning to recognize abuse early is key to combating it. Children often emulate what they see in their homes, in the media and among their peers, said Giselle Perez, a prevention supervisor for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children of Collier County.

For this reason, the shelter is working to raise awareness through several education programs in Collier County Public Schools, reaching students in Pre-K to high school.

“We prevent the cycle of domestic violence and human trafficking in age-appropriate ways,” Perez said.

Hands are for Helping not for Hurting, an interactive program

required for all Collier first graders, is also offered in many of the county's private preschools. Children are presented with nonaggressive methods to express anger and other emotions and focus on positive ways to use their hands. Students also create a banner with their own handstamps to display in the classroom and complete a pledge activity.

In the 2022-2023 school year, the program reached 100% of Collier's public school first graders, Perez said, and is on track to do so again this school year.

The shelter also has programs for middle school and high school age students.

At the middle school level—which includes seventh and eighth grade—students learn about building healthy friendships and setting boundaries. In high school, the focus is on dating violence and human trafficking, as well as setting boundaries.

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NAPLES ELECTION 2024

Blankenship announces candidacy for mayor

By Harriet Howard Heithaus
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Naples City Councilman Ted Blankenship has filed to run for the Naples mayoral seat, which likely raises the field to three and vacates a council seat.

A kickoff for Blankenship was scheduled for last Monday in Baker Park, and a video has been released characterizing him as a conservative who wants to change the city's direction. Among his concerns are rising taxes—he was one of two opponents of a council decision to raise property taxes from 1.15 mills to 1.17 mills.

His video also complains about bureaucrats controlling the economy and wrecking property values, a complaint Blankenship shares with another candidate for the office, Gary Price. Both had their homes damaged by floods during Hurricane Ian, and Blankenship said that three weeks after the storm, council was asked to pass new regulations that would decrease the size of what could be rebuilt.

“Some people who were elderly, or who didn't have insurance or for whatever reason were not going to rebuild, they didn't know what they could do. They'd have to take a huge haircut on what they could get for their property,” he said.

The proposed new regulations were defeated, but then returned in January for a second round of public outcry, followed by a second defeat.

“But I've heard they're going to try to bring them back again,” he said. “I think we need to listen to the people.”

Other concerns from Blankenship:

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HISTORIC LANDMARK

Time running out for Everglades City Train Depot

By Aisling Swift

Naples business owner Bill Odrey is in a race against time to save the old Everglades City Train Depot.

The 95-year-old building, once a bustling train station in the county's early years, has been in disrepair after three hurricanes caused damage to the deck and docks.

There's a deadline by the city, which wants it repaired; a deadline by developers, who are hoping he'll sell it so they can build waterfront condos; and his own deadline to find a lender to help him save what he considers a landmark before he runs out of money.

“There's only so far I can go myself,” Odrey said, adding that he's using money from his Naples business, Premier Trolley Service, to pay the mortgage. “We're working

on it feverishly. Some people here don't like an outsider being here, but nobody cared about the building before, or they would have done something before I bought it.”

Odrey, who lives in Atlanta, also has a small condo across from the depot where he lives while on the island.

The 15,000-square-foot building was built in 1928 as the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Depot and was the railroad's southernmost stop,

opening up trade with Everglades City, historic records show. The railroad ran between Immokalee and Everglades City, carrying passengers and freight, and was an important link for area tomato farms. The depot closed in 1956 and the tracks were torn out in 1959.

The Spanish-style stucco building was used in the 1957 film *Wind Across the Everglades* starring Burl Ives, Christopher Plummer, Gypsy Rose Lee and Emmett Kelly.

After the railway closed, the building was used by several restaurants, including Everglades Seafood Depot Restaurant, until Odrey bought it for \$445,000 in 2014 after it was foreclosed on. It operated as a restaurant until early 2019.

Odrey intends to fix the roof, trusses, air conditioners and deck, but said the building wasn't in

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ALA

Moms for Liberty told commissioners Drabinski's term ends next July, but the ALA board elected Drabinski because she represents its values—and she'll still have power as the ALA board's immediate past president.

"They knew about her self-proclaimed Marxist lesbian leanings and her emphasis on queering the catalog, which are all publicly documented," said Merchant, noting that the upcoming president is Cindy Howell, treasurer of the Freedom to Read Foundation, which Merchant claims celebrates sexually explicit LGBT books targeting children. She said Freedom to Read considers that efforts to keep challenged books off school library shelves constitute censorship.

"Not only does the Freedom to Read Foundation smear parental rights advocates as would-be censors, it actually goes to court to fight parents who object to these pornographic materials being made available to school children, so this is a much bigger problem than one person," she said.

She said the Florida Citizens Alliance, Christian Family Coalition, Moms for America, Moms for Liberty, Florida Legislative Committee, Defend Florida, Republican Liberty Caucus and the Florida Republican Assembly are working statewide to encourage all Florida counties to end ALA memberships.

Jason Beal contended the ALA helps parents and kids gain access to banned books, such as those with LGBTQ themes, which he called sexually explicit. "This is grooming," Beal said. "The first thing a groomer does is they expose the children to pornography, to things to desensitize them."

Pat Cunningham told commissioners libraries should be for education, not indoctrination and pornography.

But Joy White, a St. Ann Catholic School librarian, said claims about the ALA were untrue. The ALA, she said, has helped with her neglected library and provided invaluable assistance.

"I have students now coming in and finding

books they want to read," White said. "Their reading scores are going up now, all because of the education, the forums and the webinars that I've done through the American Library Association. They've been supporting libraries and librarians for over 100 years."

During questioning by Commission Chairman Rick LoCastro, White said the ALA helped libraries with checkout procedures during COVID and that many librarians feel the same way she does about the ALA, which provides numerous library resources on its website.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has enacted a series of measures that have led to an increase in banned and restricted books, making Florida the first to enact laws to make it easier for parents to challenge books in school libraries, including those they deem pornographic, inappropriate or dealing with race and gender issues.

Last year, Clay County had 489 objections to books and 177 were removed from shelves. No other county comes close. Collier had seven objections and no removals, while Lee had no objections or removals, according to a list posted by the state Department of Education.

The ALA issue first came up in Collier when Marco City Council Chairman Greg Folley contacted LoCastro after hearing concerns over the ALA. Around that time, LoCastro said, the Florida Citizens Alliance said it had similar concerns, and residents later contacted him.

LoCastro spoke to County Manager Amy Patterson, who reached out to Public Services Director Tanya Williams and they discussed it. At the end of last month's BCC budget meeting, commissioners briefly discussed the ALA and Patterson directed Williams to review the membership and provide a report.

Soon after, Merchant and others brought it up at the BCC workshop on Oct. 3, asking that commissioners put it on the Oct. 17 agenda and to consider severing ties.

In her executive summary to commissioners, Williams said the county's ALA renewal is set for January, at a cost of \$1,634, an increase over \$1,565 this year. ALA provides the Collier County Public Library System and Library Advisory Board with access to

professional resources, publications, tools, training and development opportunities, as well as continuing education, including advocacy, legislation and issues, awards, grants, scholarships, conferences, events and publications.


The membership enables library employees to attend ALA conferences at half price and to receive a 10% to 15% discount on promotional and professional materials, such as summer reading, books and eBooks, online training, in-person continuing education and best practices.

Williams noted Drabinski's election prompted several state, county and municipal libraries to cancel memberships and others are considering it. The Department of State won't accept Library Services & Technology Act grants if project activities are associated with the ALA, she said, but Collier libraries don't usually apply for LSTA grants that include the ALA.

Williams said county employees haven't attended an ALA conference since the pandemic, but have attended Public Library Association conferences. They attended ALA conferences to talk with vendors when the county was considering purchasing software, services or resources. "It is a huge, vast tool for us in going to one location and being able to talk with vendors within the public library profession," Williams said of ALA conferences.

Just seconds later, Commissioner Bill McDaniel made a motion to end the ALA membership effective immediately and it was seconded by Commissioner Chris Hall.

The ALA didn't reply to requests for comment. Marlene Heywood, operations and events manager for Collier County's Friends of the Library, said the group cannot comment on politics.

Williams said last week that library staff can still attend future ALA conferences or register for online continuing education training, adding, "As is the practice for all non-member conferences/events, staff may do so at their own expense and on their own time during approved vacation or personal leave, dependent on the staffing needs of the library system at the time." 

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HELPING HANDS

Those can include mental, emotional and physical boundaries. For many middle and high school students, digital abuse is an increasing issue, so the shelter also discusses setting digital boundaries.

"Digital abuse can be seen as controlling your partner's location, constantly checking up on them," Perez said.


The shelter also hosts Teens Against Dating Violence clubs at Immokalee High School and Lorenzo Walker Technical College. The extracurricular clubs offer students a chance to gather and learn more about dating violence from their own peers.

"We understand that your friend is more likely to go to their friend," Perez said.

The shelter's website reports that in 2022, there were 1,963 reported domestic violence incidents in Collier County. The real number is likely higher—more than 3,600, according to the shelter. The shelter estimates that those incidents are likely to have cost more than \$31 million, dollars spent in law enforcement and medical bills and represented in losses to local businesses.

Perez said she has seen how the shelter's early intervention efforts are benefiting local students. Several, especially at the high school level, have approached her to share their experiences. Some become emotional during the presentation.

"I've had students come up to me and say, 'I went through this and thank you for being here,'" she said.

For more information on the shelter's educational and outreach programs, go to naplesshelter.org. 



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