

# The Rockbridge

# ADVOCATE

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## Shhh!!! Staff, board gagged at our library

*Alan Bobowski has been on the job for less than a year. He's reprimanded two branch librarians. A third just quit.*

Amy Smith quit her job as manager of the Buena Vista branch of the Rockbridge Regional Library late last month.

She posted a note on the library door thanking the patrons, telling them they had enriched her life and wishing them well.

Regional library director Alan Bobowski went over to Buena Vista, tore the note from the door and announced that director of technical services Sue Milo was now in charge.

Smith was the only branch library manager here who had not been formally disciplined by Bobowski since he took over Linda Krantz's job as library director last spring.

The Glasgow branch manager has been reprimanded for allegedly talking to the town manager about a library garden. The Goshen branch manager has been reprimanded twice, once for allegedly speaking with a library board member, and once for allegedly saying something to another staff member.

Some members of the regional library board have some major concerns about Bobowski and his dealings with the staff, and about some of the plans being made for the libraries, particularly the Buena Vista branch, where a major purge of the collection is being implemented. Some members of that board have been fussed at by the chairman for allegedly talking to the press and to the staff.

The chairman, Steve Weintraub, says the board "acts

as one" and that it is "inappropriate" for individual members to talk with the press or to conduct their own inquiries into Bobowski and his actions.

Amy Smith didn't mention her differences with Bobowski or her serious concerns about the future of the Buena Vista library in the note she posted on the library door. Nor did she mention the verbal abuse, threats and offensive language that a number of sources say she and others who work under Bobowski have been subjected to since he took over. She didn't mention them in her note, and she didn't mention them in her letter of resignation.

But her resignation, which follows, does mention her concerns about the future of the Buena Vista Library. They are concerns shared by many patrons and some members

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## *A letter from the editor:*

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### **Our library**

One sure sign of a despotism is when questions are treated as acts of rebellion.

Some of the staff and directors of the Rockbridge Regional Library system have questioned some of the blizzard of changes being foisted by director Alan Bobowski.

The questions have been met with threats, abuse and a witch hunt.

Bobowski was hired a year ago to replace Linda Krantz, the library's first director.

In all the years Linda ran the library, there was not a single serious complaint about her treatment of anyone, or about the library's direction.

Under her leadership, the library slowly grew and changed. No one questioned the changes, because they were gradual, well-thought out, and responsive to the communities the library serves. And because the changes were well considered, the libraries that comprise the system — the headquarters in Lexington and the libraries in Bath, Goshen, Glasgow and Buena Vista — all became community centers.

They became community centers by virtue of their being wonderful libraries. They are not community centers that happen to be libraries. And they do not need to be turned into "community centers" or "taken to the next level," a phrase that usually means turning an institution on its head for no good reason. They do not need to lose their personal touch and sense of caring because "professionals" have gazed into crystal balls and determined that patronage will plummet unless libraries become more like Barnes & Noble bookstores or cyber-cafes.

Trying to make them so puts at risk the tremendous support and loyalty the library has gained over the last three decades.

That the library system became one of our community's great treasures is the result of careful consideration, listening to patrons, the staff and branch librarians, countless donations of time, energy and money, and a great sense of place. Each of the branches, as well as the headquarters, was tailored to fit the individual communities they serve. That fitting is the result of the librarians knowing and genuinely caring about their community and their patrons, and feeling free to share their thoughts.

Mr. Bobowski came into this community from New Jersey. Before he was hired, no one bothered to call the chairman of the board of the library where he was working. The first time that man heard a peep from anyone here was when he agreed to an interview several months ago. It was an eye-opener. "Our gain is your loss," was one of the

things he said.

Since Bobowski was hired, the board has passed some policy revisions giving him more power, and itself less. There are others in the works that would grant him even more power.

That's the last thing in the world he needs.

Bobowski points to state library policies to support some of the changes that have happened.

But state library policies do not demand libraries to throw out major portions of their collections — thousands of books — in order to provide space for five copies of today's best sellers.

State policy does not demand that those who know the library best be shut out of decision-making processes.

State policy does not demand that a board should obtain information only from the director.

And state policy does not tell a library director to stifle anyone's freedom of expression or right to raise questions. Some questions need to be raised. Many of them concern what is happening at the Buena Vista library.

Bobowski recently obtained a grant to begin operating a call center training facility and business in Buena Vista. (A private and non-related call center is already in the works in town.)

A logical question might be: should a public library be in the business of running a call center for private industries?

And even if it should, there are some serious questions about the proposal. The current plan is to put the center in the old Ace Hardware building. When board member Jane Armstrong noted at a board meeting that downtown Buena Vista has a wireless high-speed internet system that could not handle a call center, she was ignored. Given that treatment, why bother asking questions about unrealistic timelines in the grant proposal?

Bobowski has spent an inordinate amount of time making plans to relocate the Buena Vista library. When board member Ann Waller asked why someone doesn't find out what the patrons and leaders of the town want, her question was brushed away without response.

And in the meantime, Bobowski is clearing out large chunks of the Buena Vista library collection. Patrons, he says, will be able to order the books from Lexington and, assuming there are any copies left in the library system, and have them in two days. Or, patrons can drive to Lexington if they want the books faster.

Apparently, Buena Vista, with the library system's second-highest circulation, is now a third-world outpost where citizens would prefer their library to be more about nice furniture than books. Bobowski's plans, and the way he has gone about implementing them, caused a fine branch manager to quit. The patrons are upset. Board members have lost sleep over it all.

It is to their credit that they decided to begin a public discussion about Bobowski and his plans.

It is not the words of employees, their families, friends and hairdressers that pose a risk of damaging the library. It is not the words of patrons. It is not the words of board members who listen and ask questions that need to be asked. In the long run, the questions can only help.