

Panel votes to refer book on teen sexuality to city attorney

ANCHORAGE

Library Advisory Board sidesteps the normal process for reconsidering materials as it votes 3-2 for a review of “Let’s Talk About It.”

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The Anchorage Library Advisory Board this week sidestepped its existing policy for dealing with community concerns over its materials as members voted to forward a book in its collection to the municipal attorney for review.

The board on Wednesday voted 3-2 to send the book “Let’s Talk About It,” by Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan, to the city attorney over concern from a board member that having the book at the library was breaking state statute and city code.

Penguin Random House, the book’s publisher, describes the book as a graphic novel that covers “relationships, friendships, gender, sexuality, anatomy, body image, safe sex, sexting, jealousy, rejection, sex education,” and says the book is a “goto handbook for every teen.”

Two Anchorage Assembly members have raised concerns over the board’s actions. One Assembly member, Felix Rivera, called the move unprecedented. The library board’s chair, who voted against referring the book to the city attorney, called skipping over the existing protocol “inappropriate.”

The Library Advisory Board is the planning body for the library’s activities and special projects, makes recommendations to the mayor’s office and the city Assembly and reviews annual budgets. Its members are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the Assembly.

At Wednesday’s board meeting, Anchorage Public Library director Virginia McClure described to board members the library’s existing process for reconsidering materials. Requests can be made by filling out a form and dropping it at a library location, she said. From there, the library’s collections management coordinator evaluates it, McClure said. A reconsideration committee made up of staff librarians is usually involved, though that committee “fell by the wayside a little bit during COVID,” McClure said.

The requester can then appeal the group’s decision to McClure, who evaluates the request before getting back to the person who wanted the book reviewed. They can further appeal the decision by taking the request to the Library Advisory Board for a final decision, McClure said.

Board member Doug Weimann said he believed that by having “Let’s Talk About It” in its collection and available to those under 18, the library was breaking municipal code and state statute, and made a motion to have the book “reviewed by legal.” The municipal code and state statute he cited relates to the exhibition of sexually explicit content to minors.

“The formal request was to have legal look at the code and decide whether or not that particular piece of literature is breaking a law or not. I mean, I’d just like a legal opinion on it,” Weimann said during the meeting.

McClure said that normally, the board should go through the existing reconsideration process. She said that if someone made a request based on the points Weimann raised, she would approach the city attorney during that process.

Weimann could not be reached for an interview Friday.

The board members who voted in favor of referring the book to the city attorney were Dennis Dupras, Anchorage First Lady Deb Bronson and Weimann — all appointed by Anchorage Mayor Dave Bronson. Members Barbara Jacobs and board chair Cristy Willer, appointed by former Anchorage Mayor Ethan Berkowitz, voted against it, and both said the library should go through the existing process. Two other members, Alice Qannik Glenn and Nancy Hemsath, were not at the meeting.

Chris Constant, the vice chair of the Anchorage Assembly, on Saturday raised concerns following the vote over what he termed “procedural irregularities,” and said he is looking into whether the measure actually passed.

The three members who voted in favor don’t add up to a majority of the board’s total membership, because it has seven members currently and two additional vacancies. Constant said he’d spoken with the city’s ombudsman and the Assembly’s legal department, and reached out to the municipal attorney over the issue.

Willer said that the board’s developed process is a legitimate way to deal with a community complaint and is a proper first line of response.

“It seemed like jumping that process was an inappropriate thing to do,” she said.

She said the book will stay on the shelves while it’s being reviewed — the book has been on hold for another patron, so it’s not in the library at the moment.

“The reason that I really want to use the process is not necessarily because of the process, but because it is one that’s inclusive and more transparent, which is what people are generally after, than sending it to an attorney,” Willer said. “It involves more voices in the room and more consideration, and I’m a fan of that kind of way to deal with issues, especially controversial issues.”

During the meeting, Willer encouraged the person who first raised issues about the book to Weimann to go through the normal process.

“As (Weimann) pointed out, this is a hot topic,” Willer said. “I think it’s a hot topic that is much broader than us, and much broader than this town and much broader than this state and I think it’s important to have a community platform to discuss these issues. I’m totally — as chair and as a human being — I’m very willing to talk about things that bother us on either side of any issue.”

In an email Friday, Mc-Clure said no formal requests for reconsideration had been received recently, and that the process was used within the last year. She said there’s no precedent or formal process for referring an item in the library’s collection to the municipal attorney, and that the library had reached out to the attorney’s office. They were waiting to hear for a response on next steps Friday, she wrote.

The municipal attorney and mayor’s office on Friday did not respond to emailed questions about the book’s referral.

The Anchorage library system has been at the center of several controversies under Bronson. Its deputy director, Judy Eledge, has been accused of making racist statements and creating a hostile work environment in the library system during her tenure. A lawsuit filed in federal court last month claims the city's former director of the Office of Equal Opportunity was fired in retaliation for reporting complaints made by employees about Eledge's conduct.

Eledge was also at the meeting Wednesday and didn't speak in support of or against Weimann's motion.

The book referred to the city attorney by the Anchorage Library Board, "Let's Talk About It," has also been the subject of scrutiny in communities in Connecticut, North Dakota and Iowa — part of a growing national controversy over efforts to ban books related to sexuality, gender and race.

Also, earlier this month, Alaska Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy unveiled proposed education policies that would, among other things, restrict sexual education in schools statewide.

Anchorage Assembly member Felix Rivera said the library board's decision was surprising and unprecedented.

"It makes me concerned, frankly, about the judgment of the members of the Library Advisory Board and their motivations," Rivera said.

Rivera said that over the last few months, Anchorage and the rest of the state have "officially joined in a much broader way, the culture wars that have ingrained the rest of the country," particularly around books and access to books. He said the actions of the library board are another example that Alaskans are not immune to the culture wars.

The same book, "Let's Talk About It," drew attention in Anchorage recently after a man tried to read passages from it during the public testimony portion of an Anchorage School Board meeting in February. The testifier said the book was at both Romig Middle School and Bartlett High School, before reading from parts of the book. The school board's chair interrupted the testifier and asked him to take his concerns to the superintendent to go through the school district's process that deals with book concerns.

The book has never been available for student checkout, said district chief academic officer Sven Gustafson in an interview Friday. Two libraries had it in a batch, realized it was not something they wanted out for kids, and put it in a backroom professional library, Gustafson said. He said the books remained there for a couple of years without use and were not checked out by teachers.

During Wednesday's library advisory board meeting, Weimann called consideration of the book a "hot topic," and the Anchorage School District had called an "emergency meeting" last Friday.

Gustafson said that the district did hold a meeting last Friday, but that it was to support staff who started receiving threatening emails after conservative faith-based website the Alaska Watchman posted an article with their contact information and photos last month.

"We were just meeting to support them and by no means was it an emergency meeting. And we were not even discussing this particular book," Gustafson said. "We were just trying to make sure the librarians knew that we were supportive of them."

