

SF Library Denied Funds for RFID

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors' Budget Committee rejected a request by the city's library system to reserve funds for an RFID project in the coming fiscal year.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

July 11, 2005—The San Francisco Board of Supervisors' Budget Committee, in a 4-1 vote on June 30, rejected a request from the [San Francisco Public Library](#) to reserve \$680,000 for the deployment of an RFID system. The potential deployment would have used RFID tags instead of bar codes to identify and checkout library books at 12 of the library's 28 branches. The committee, a group of five city district supervisors who vote on budget allocation and reserve requests for San Francisco's annual budget, did not indicate why it refused the request.

The San Francisco Public Library operates through a specific fund in the city's budget, but the board of supervisors and the mayor must approve how the money is spent. In order to have funds allocated for a given purpose, they must be approved when the mayor passes the budget at the beginning of the fiscal year. At any time during the year, the library may request that money already allocated to its general fund be used for a specific purpose, but that requires a supplemental appropriation be sought, which is more difficult than using funds already reserved for that purpose.

The library has been considering the deployment of RFID in its system but has not yet concluded whether it will go forward with the technology. In order to make the funds available if it decides to move forward with the technology in the coming fiscal year, however, the library asked the budget committee to reserve, rather than allocate, the \$680,000.

"We've been looking at RFID for a few years for inventory control and as a way of dealing with repetitive stress disorders [among employees] resulting from the use of bar code scanners," says San Francisco Public Library's chief of communication, collections and adult services, Marcia Schneider.

Though the library is considering using RFID tags to store only a book's bar code number, some patrons are concerned that their privacy could be violated through surreptitious readings of these tags by unauthorized parties with access to the library's secure database.

The library wants to address these concerns before making its final decision on RFID, and to provide a public forum for discussion of these issues. Therefore, earlier this year, it assembled a 10-member Library Privacy and Technology Committee, consisting of library staff (including those representing organized labor), as well as academics and other interested persons. The committee has met four times thus far, and has heard from a number of advocacy groups, including the [Electronic Frontier Foundation \(EFF\)](#), a San Francisco-based advocacy group working to protect privacy rights. The foundation opposes the use of RFID in libraries in general, saying the technology is immature and puts patron privacy at risk. The library had expected the committee to wrap up its discussions on RFID and help decide whether or not to move forward with deploying the technology in time for last week's budget meeting with the city. However, that did not happen.

Last year, the Board of Supervisors' Budget Committee granted the library a reserve of \$300,000 for a possible RFID deployment at six branches. That reserve has since been absorbed back into its general operating budget, as are all reserved funds not used by the end of the fiscal year. Schneider thinks the decision to deny this year's reserve request reflects a growing concern among Budget Committee members about the use of RFID. A number of San Francisco citizens in the districts the supervisors represent object to the use of the technology in library systems.

By next year, Schneider says, she hopes the library will have made a decision about whether to deploy the technology. If it decides in favor of using RFID, it will request allocation of funds in its operating budget.

Across the San Francisco Bay, the Berkeley Public Library has come under fire from the EFF and concerned citizens. The group says the Berkeley Library did not provide adequate information to the community about its plans to use RFID before deploying the technology. The Berkeley Library's RFID system, which became operational in August 2004, is made by CheckPoint Systems. The library is currently using it to check out books, with plans to begin checking out CDs and DVDs with it soon, as well. Within the year, the library wants to install RFID-enabled self-checkout stations, so patrons can check out their own media without the assistance of library staff.

However, Director of Library Services Jackie Griffin maintains that the library had made its plans public for years and first met with the EFF in October 2003, nine months before it decided to purchase and deploy the CheckPoint hardware. She says all board meetings at which the RFID proposal was discussed were publicly announced and open to anyone. The library's budget is not subject to approval by the Berkeley City Council, which is the equivalent of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors.

RFID has, for years, been used for book checkout and inventory control in libraries across the United States and abroad, and there is some evidence its use has decreased the number of repetitive injury claims among library staffs.

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