

Public Libraries Feel Strain Of Budget Cuts

BY TONY PUGH

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WASHINGTON — They're the lone source of free computer and internet access in most communities, allowing the unemployed to search for jobs, learn computer skills and spruce up their resumes. Millions use them to stay in touch with relatives, apply for government services or to seek health information.

But public libraries' critical role as neighborhood information hubs hasn't shielded the nearly 17,000 of them across the country from budget scalpels.

After spurring a surge in public library use nationwide, the tough economy is forcing many branches to cut staff, hours and programming right when many cash-strapped people need them most.

As in previous downturns, Americans turned to their libraries during the Great Recession for free children's programming or to borrow books, movies and music. In 2008, when the economy was in free fall, a record 68 percent of Americans had a library card, and library visits and borrowing spiked as well.

However, a whopping 72 percent of public libraries reported budget cuts this year; 43 percent cut staff as well, according to a recent survey by the Library Journal.

While public libraries rely overwhelmingly on local tax dollars, 19 states cut public library funding this year, and 17 reported library closures, a new American Library Association survey found.

Big-city libraries have been hit hardest. Among those with more than 1 million annual visitors, roughly 9 in 10 cut budgets and staff. Systemwide cuts in their operating hours, on average, amounted to two branch closings, the journal survey found.

Experts say the funding crunch could cause libraries to lose much of the progress they've made in becoming relevant in the digital age. As years of cuts mount, many fear battered library computers won't be replaced, subscriptions won't be renewed, software upgrades will be delayed and staffing shortages will be institutionalized.

Already, 7 in 10 public libraries don't have enough computers to meet public demand, and more than half lack staff to adequately serve all job seekers.

Whether this becomes the "new normal" is unclear. But with state and local funds limited by slow revenue growth and a strong anti-tax climate, public libraries are at a critical juncture.

"I think there's going to be some library systems that look very different when we come out of this recession. And I don't know if those dollars are ever coming back for some libraries," said John Carlo Bertot, director of the Center for Library & Information Innovation at the University of Maryland.

The Bascom Library and Community Center in San Jose,

Calif., was completed in December, but it sits empty because the city can't afford to staff or operate it.

That means people such as Al Mata, who lives three blocks from Bascom, has to drive to a library in nearby Santa Clara so his two sons can complete their schoolwork.

"That's my biggest complaint. I'm paying taxes in San Jose, but I can't utilize the resources. The library is just sitting there with the gates closed," Mata said.

Bill Todd, 75, who also lives nearby, said he wrote the mayor, Gov. Jerry Brown and President Barack Obama asking for a loan to get the library opened. He's not expecting a response.

"Why put up a building if you can't open it?" Todd asked. "It's just waiting for broken windows and spray paint. It has a fence around it, but I can climb over the fence and I'm 75."

Adding insult to injury: San Jose residents have been paying for Bascom and other facilities since 2001, when voters passed a major library construction bond. A separate measure to pay for books and furnishings was also passed, said Steve Kline, the president of the Friends of Bascom Library.

"If people knew in 2001 that we were going to build the building, but not open it, that bond wouldn't have passed," Kline said.

Despite their funding peril, public libraries remain one of the most popular government services and historically have fared pretty well at the ballot box. In 2009, voters passed 84 percent of library funding referendums nationwide and 54 percent of library construction measures, according to the Library Journal.

But that success rate faltered in Troy, Mich., where the city's only public library is set to close on May 1 after voters defeated several ballot measures last year that would have kept the 50-year-old facility alive.

The last measure lost by about 700 votes after a local anti-tax group told residents they could force the city to keep the library open without raising taxes, said Kim Yanchyshyn, a library volunteer.

"They said, 'There's money in the budget if they just get rid of waste,'" Yanchyshyn recalled. "We did everything we could to communicate that there was no guarantee that this (claim) was even valid."

As it turned out, the claim wasn't valid. In February, a judge ruled the city could close the library. To make matters worse, once the library closes, Troy residents will have to pay from \$100 to nearly \$200 a year to borrow books from libraries in neighboring cities.

As she worked the counter at the library's bookstore recently, Yanchyshyn said customers were openly expressing regret about the library's fate.

"People have finally sort of realized that for a relatively small amount of additional tax, this city is losing a lot in terms of services," Yanchyshyn said.

Public libraries in their cur-

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JOHN CARLO BERTOT

rent form didn't catch on in the U.S. until the 1800s, when free education for children became the norm and rapid immigration drove explosive population growth. Pittsburgh steel magnate Andrew Carnegie bankrolled construction of roughly 1,700 public libraries in the U.S. between 1881 and 1919.

But even Carnegie's name-

sake library system in Pittsburgh — the nation's first to open neighborhood branches in 1898 — saw its operating budget cut by \$1.5 million this year.

The budget crisis has forced libraries such as the one in Shrewsbury, Mass., to get more creative in seeking new funding.

When the Shrewsbury library lost funding for Sunday hours in

2005, library director Ellen Dolan asked about 100 area businesses for help. For \$500, a company could "sponsor" one full day of Sunday library service.

In exchange, each week's sponsoring company was acknowledged with a large sign in the lobby that greeted visitors. Dolan said the effort raised enough money to fund Sunday hours from October to May. She said the program offers a promising example for cash-strapped libraries elsewhere.

In the past six years, the sponsorship cost has climbed to \$600, but civic groups and individuals have joined businesses to keep the tradition alive.

Recently, an 8-year-old boy

asked that loved ones sponsor a Sunday in his name rather than purchase gifts for his birthday.

"Instead of taking gifts for himself, he gave a gift to the community," Dolan said. "We had a birthday cake for him here that day, and he served birthday cake to the visitors. It was pretty wonderful."

Municipal funding for the Sunday service hasn't been restored since the program began. But the new community sponsors have become "strong and vocal advocates for why the library is important in the community," Dolan said. "That has really been a surprising and wonderful outcome."

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Homemade Rope Aids Mo. Jail Escape

ST. LOUIS (AP) — A "knuckle-headed corrections officer" is to blame for the escape of two men who apparently climbed down a homemade rope Friday morning to escape from a St. Louis detention center, the mayor's chief of staff said.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that Vernon Collins, 34, and David White, 33, were discovered missing just before 7 a.m., but police believe they might have been gone for 90 minutes by that time.

White was later caught at a gas station wearing what a station clerk described as a "Bruce Lee wig," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported. He was taken into custody about 4 p.m. after police surrounded an older-model white Cadillac at a Phillips 66 station. Collins remained at large Friday afternoon.

Collins was in jail on a charge of assaulting a law enforcement officer, while White was being held on charges of assault, burglary and property damage. Collins also is accused of overpowering a corrections officer.

Jeff Rainford, Mayor Francis Slay's chief of staff, told the newspaper the escape was the first at the \$101 million, state-of-the-art downtown jail built in 2002 and it happened when a corrections officer failed to fully investigate noises coming from the men's cell.

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