

# Budget's fine, but library layoffs loom

By Don McIntosh

Multnomah County Library is about to lay off a sixth of its workforce by order of the library director, even though its budget is under no threat.

All 19 library locations have been closed to the public system-wide since March 14 because of COVID-19. The library continues to pay employee salaries, whether their work can be performed or not. In June, the library resumed lending by returning staff to the job in limited numbers and allowing patrons to schedule in-person pickups of materials they reserve online.

But on July 7, the library announced layoffs would take place anyway. A July 20 email from library human resources department said 128 positions would be eliminated, including nine managers and 119 workers represented by AFSCME Local 88. Laid off employees would continue to get health insurance through the end of the year.

"The library cannot pay a significant portion of its workforce indefinitely for work they are not able to do during the pandemic," library director Vailey Oehlke wrote in a July 28 statement. "The library must honor its obligation to the public that funds the library by acting as a thoughtful and transparent steward of public resources."

Since then, the number slated for layoff has shrunk to as few as 79, Oehlke told Oregon Public Broadcasting Aug. 13. To reduce the number of involuntary layoffs, administrators have been asking for volunteers to retire or agree to be laid off. Initially, layoffs were to take place Aug. 30, but at Local 88's urging, have been moved back to Sept. 30.

But library employees like Nicole Newsom question the need for any layoffs in a time of extraordinary community need, when there's no urgent budgetary necessity.

"The layoffs are unnecessary," says Newsom, a union steward and 25-year library employee. "They're not due to budget issues."

Multnomah County Library is funded with a dedicated property tax. Unlike income tax revenue, which is significantly impacted by the pandemic recession, property tax revenues are expected to be relatively unaffected.

Union members aren't asking the library to pay employees who aren't working, but they're

asking the library to be creative in finding work they can do to serve the community.

"Even though the buildings aren't open to the public the way they used to be, the needs and demands of the public haven't gone away, and in fact there's probably greater need," said Local 88 representative Eben Pullman. "We're hoping we can make progress, and encourage library management not to make these cuts."

At one point, the union proposed taking part in the Oregon Employment Department's Workshare program, which pays a partial unemployment benefit for employees who have their hours reduced but library management rejected the suggestion.

In early August, after Local 88 proposed a task force to evaluate member suggestions for ways to avert layoffs, more than 200 library workers contributed ideas. The task force presented

the most promising ideas to the library's executive team Aug. 13.

One idea would be to extend hours and shifts. With fewer staff in locations because of social distancing rules, it's taking the library longer than usual to fulfill hold requests; that, and occasional lines for hold pickups, could be eliminated if the library would extend hours at branches the with highest circulation, and schedule two shifts. Other ideas include assigning library staff to work with teachers to help families with technology when the school year begins; deploying library workers to help unemployed workers with resumes and job searches; allowing mask-wearing patrons back in to browse in limited numbers; holding socially distant children's story time outdoors; and providing printing and other services to the public.

But Newsom, who served on the task force, said on Aug. 18



Multnomah County library locations are closed to browsing, but patrons can place materials on hold and schedule appointments to pick them up when they arrive. Library management is planning layoffs Sept. 30, while rejecting suggestions by members of AFSCME Local 88 to keep workers employed, like expanding the hours available for patrons to pick up hold materials.

it's been "radio silence" from management since the suggestions were delivered.

Rank-and-file members have been organizing to stop the layoffs, and are calling on the public to write to library management and the County Commission. To

get the message out, they created a web site, [savelibrarystaff.org](http://savelibrarystaff.org)

"Our members are ready and willing to do the work, and there's work they could be doing," Pullman said.



In our glorious fight for civil rights, we must guard against being fooled by false slogans, such as 'right-to-work.' It provides no 'rights' and no 'work.' Its purpose is to destroy labor unions and the freedom of collective bargaining ... We demand this fraud be stopped. The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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