

# DOUGLAS COUNTY TO SHUTTER PUBLIC LIBRARIES

*Loss of timber money has led to a county financial crisis*

In the coming months, all eleven of Douglas County's public libraries will close due to severe county budget shortfalls brought on by the loss of federal timber revenue.

The county is facing a devastating budgetary crisis that will continue for the foreseeable future, with most non-vital services being cut. Even the sheriff's department may face a cut of two-thirds.

The ten smaller libraries throughout the county will shut down operations April 1, and the Roseburg Library will close May 31.

Historically, most of Douglas County's budget came from the timber harvest on federal forestlands, which make up 54 percent of land in the county. According to Douglas County Commissioner Gary Leif, "When we take a tree down and harvest a tree, we replant it, but we make about \$500 per tree."

After the environmental movement in the '90s moved to protect spotted owl habitat, Leif says, the \$50 million the county used to receive each year from timber sales trickled to a stop.

A federal safety net program called Secure Rural Schools temporarily filled the gap, but the final federal check to the county came last year. "Now we're down to \$8.8 million (in revenue in the current budget) and we have to run a huge operation without that timber revenue," Leif says.

The libraries are closing despite efforts last year to protect their portion of the budget. Last year a ballot measure to create a library district failed, partly because it would have increased property tax by 44 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation.

Library director Harold Hayes says "there was a lot of misinformation out there" about the measure, adding that many citizens in the community don't support tax increases for any reason.

Although the board of commissioners is closing the libraries, Commissioner Leif says volunteer operations and city governments may take over the existing library buildings, along with their book collections and computers, to continue providing library services.

Two cities in the county, Oakland and Sutherlin, have already signed intergovernmental agreements to open libraries under a "reading room" model, allowing citizens in those towns to have continued access to library resources. Leif is working with the Library Futures Task Force to find workable solutions in individual communities and is even working to get computers donated.

Library director Hayes says, however, that the reading rooms can never match the full services of a public library. "We live in a demographic where many, many people don't have a computer, so the library was one of those venues where they could do something as simple as apply for a job."

Hayes says he's proud of the library system's pre-kindergarten literacy programs and doubts volunteers can keep a library reading room open forever. "Public libraries are called public for a reason," he says. "When you get down to brass tacks, if you no longer have public funding, then how are you going to come up with a similar amount?"

Commissioner Leif agrees that the reading rooms aren't a long-term solution, though he does view them as a stopgap allowing cities and citizens to make their own choices about the future of the library. These short-term solutions fill the gap while he seeks broader funding from grants and the state and federal government, he says.

"There's a lot of things we've been doing for a lot of years that we think are important for the community," Leif says. "We just simply can't write the check anymore."

Hayes isn't optimistic. "What public libraries do for a community is absolutely fundamental, and Douglas County won't have that." ■

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- |                               |                                     |
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