CLOSED DOORS; OPEN QUESTIONS

How the libraries of Oregon are being redefined

WORDS IAN MULLIN
PHOTOS MACKENZIE MORAN
AUDIO MORGAN KRAKOW
VIDEO HELEN WERNER
DESIGN JASON YUN
What is happening in Douglas county?

Patrons of the Douglas County Library in Roseburg, Oregon hurriedly collected books and piled them in plastic milk crates. The library teemed with the sounds of keys jangling, scanners beeping and people bustling about, their echoes reverberating off the grand timber beams that stretch across the atrium. There was an urgency in these people. A few weeks later, the library closed its doors for good on the May 30, the last branch of its system to do so.

For community members, the library provides essential services and opportunities. Michelle Wilson, a Roseburg resident, stated, “I am not a good reader so I do books on tape or books on CD.”

Douglas county’s library system technically closed on the first of April. The county voted against a proposed ballot measure that would have raised property taxes in order to fund the library in November. With no backup plan, the county government was left scrambling to sustain and reorganize its library system.

The county’s three commissioners created the Library Future’s Task Force to address the issue. Led by Commissioner Gary Leif, the task force has set out to find a long-term solution to a problem that has been looming for some time. “The library has known for ten years,” Leif said of the present predicament. “They’ve been given info that says, if safety net or secure rural funding goes away, we need an alternative. We can’t fund this with our eight million from property taxes.”

More than half of land in Douglas county is owned and controlled by the federal government. Therefore, sixty percent of county land is untaxed when you factor in churches and other non-profits. The primary source of tax revenue comes from property taxes, accruing roughly nine million dollars each year. Two years ago, however, the county was spending around 20 million. To make up the difference, the county relied on safety net and Secure Rural Schools (SRS) funds. The latter, coming from the federal government, intended to help counties greatly impacted by the decline of the timber industry. The United States Congress did not reauthorize Secure Rural Schools funds this year.
Library closures are not a new challenge to the state. In addition to Douglas county, Jackson, Josephine, Hood River and Deschutes counties have faced questions about the stability of their libraries. Every one of these counties have been, in some way, reliant on timber revenue. However, the problem is not entirely owed to this.

State Librarian Marykay Dahlgreen said what unites these recurrences is, “the lack of planning for the loss of federal funds.”

The state provides only seven percent of funds for libraries. Overall, Oregon’s state budget faces severe shortfalls in regard to other essential services, such as education. Last fall a measure that would have increased corporate income taxes and alleviated pressures on educational services failed.

“Anytime there’s a discussion about raising revenue by creating a tax or increasing them, there’s a huge pushback to that,” Dahlgreen said about the state.

For nearly ten years, Josephine county operated without a county-wide library system, maintaining only the operations that volunteer groups could sustain. Before approving a new library district this spring, the county had proposed and voted against a new tax levy twice. On May 16, the county approved the creation of a special library district.

A special library district is a separate unit of government that is entirely dedicated to the library operations of their county. This unit is presided over by a board of directors elected by the community. Every county that has reopened its libraries has done so by creating a special library district. This model provides the county with stable funding. Because they are their own unit of government, special library districts do not compete with other services for funding, a challenge that has haunted Douglas and Josephine counties.

Douglas county will similarly reassess their museum, land department and sheriff’s department, all of which currently rely on the county’s general savings fund. In response, the county has reduced its some 1,000 employees, to a little over 500, a figure that is likely to be under 500 after May 30.

“What we’re seeing now is some of the most important services that Douglas county has offered are going by the wayside because of the lack of revenue from lack of timber production,” Library Futures Task Force member Brian Prawitz said.
Several organizations have approached the task force with their ideas for helping the libraries. Some of these ideas have come from private for-profit companies who offer to manage the library operations. Other organizations have offered to be anchor tenants, helping staff the library in exchange for the library’s physical space from which they can run their organization.

The Sutherlin Valley Online Academy, an alternative school in the Sutherlin School District within Douglas county, will move into and share the library building over the summer. This partnership works well for both parties because it gives a physical space for the school’s operations and will provide networking services, internet, circulation software and even some staff for the library.

Library Future’s Task Force member Sean Mock, who represents the city of Sutherlin, said, “We are in a lot better place to operate in long-term than lots of other communities because of this relationship with the school district.”

The Sutherlin library is currently being run entirely by volunteer efforts. A group of about 50 volunteers has sustained the library. “They’ve managed to keep it at the same level of service, with a few differences,” Mock said, noting the inherent shortcomings of a library from which books cannot be checked out. “For a town the size of Sutherlin, about 7,000 people, that is pretty significant.”

Sutherlin volunteers have also considered permanently separating from the county library system and creating a city library, a model that relies solely on the tax base within the city. They have begun laying the foundation for this by starting their own non-profit organization to help identify and raise funding for their library. However, support remains mixed for potential autonomy. According to Mock, the majority of people favor being a part of the larger system because of the greater access to materials.

“There’s more of a sense of what a library should be in terms of sharing ideas,” Mock said of retaining the county-wide district. “Having more access is the key thing. There’s more opportunities for people.”
A central conversation that these closures have brought to the forefront is what constitutes a library and what role it plays in a community; addressing this helps guide the task force in its deliberations.

“It means getting to borrow books. I love to read. That’s my major hobby,” said community member Gail Harper of the Douglas County Library in Roseburg.

The Library Standards Committee, a committee that serves under Oregon Library Association, has developed a set of standards to guide their work. According to president-elect of the Library Association, Buzzy Nielsen, a library entails a “collection that is actively curated, funds allocated to purchase materials, and staff paid specifically to work at a library.” A new standard that this committee is pushing is that the library provides free internet access. As internet access becomes more crucial to job-finding and connectivity with the world, the free access that libraries provide stands self-evident of its value. The discussions around the significance of libraries in the modern day often downplay their importance due to the increasing role that technology plays. OLA President Elsa Loftis disagrees with this sentiment.

“People think the digitalization of the world has undermined the value of the library but I would argue the opposite; it gives the opportunity to participate in the online world. With the proliferation of information online, you need responsible stewards who can help you get information. It used to be harder to find information. Now we are inundated with information. The role of libraries can be to help find information and help lead you thru to good information,” she said.

While disheartened by recent library closures, Loftis acknowledged that financial circumstances are currently difficult for many. “When times are tough, library services are more in demand than ever. When our budgets are hit the hardest is when people need us the most,” she said.

In 2010, the Hood River library system recruited Nielsen to aid them in their revitalization process. “The library was stagnating,” Nielsen said. “It wasn’t adapting.” A year later, it created a special library district and reopened.

“I can’t speak for Josephine or Jackson [counties], but I can say for Hood River, we have a better library because we closed. The reason for that is, having to close, when you reopen, you’re force to look at what you’re doing and say, ‘what does the community really want and what is the best way of delivering that?’” questioned Nielsen.

Tranquility is not an unfamiliar thing to a library. The books resting on the shelves are undisturbed by those who meander about, and the subtle peace, from either the solace of their words or the sheer quantity of knowledge attainable therein, is patient and unphased by how many of its pages turn over between the fingers of its readers or by how much time passes between readers themselves. On the 18th of April, the tranquility is ominous, though. The Douglas County Library Advisory Board convened in the Ford Community Room at the Douglas County Library in Roseburg. The conversation concerned the future purpose of this board, whose service would soon serve no one. On the 30th of May, the Douglas County Library closed its doors to the public. “It’s a disservice to Roseburg... Who wants to bring their children to a town with no library?” said community member Joann Berenbach.

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Next Story
Main Menu