

Flagler County Library Trustees Annual Report-2012

As required by County ordinance, this board reports at least once a year to the Board of County Commissioners on the status of the Flagler County Library.

This year's report conveys a different message and tone than those of recent years. That is because this board believes the library has now reached a tipping point and a new approach and commitment needs to be adopted in order to provide quality library service to the residents of this county.

The annual reports of the past 5 years mainly talked about the library's efforts to provide decent service in the face of steadily declining financial support for the library. To put things in perspective, five years ago the library's operating budget was \$1,500,000. This year it is \$900,000. Part of the budget reduction was a \$225,000 cut in State Aid, but regardless of the source, funding for the library has been reduced by 40%.

Trustee reports at the beginning of this period detailed how Flagler County performed with regard to basic minimum standards for library service as determined by the State of Florida. The most important guidelines included:

- Physical space
- Staffing levels
- Overall budget
- Computer access
- Budget for books and materials
- Hours of operation

For several years we reported that the Flagler County Library fell woefully short of the minimum standards in all 6 critical areas with the exception of hours of operation. The staff managed to keep the doors open. As a point of comparison, we were substantially behind the neighboring counties of Putnam, Volusia and St. Johns in meeting these standards, so it's not that the State guidelines were "pie in the sky." When it became apparent that reporting on our adherence (or lack thereof) to State standards garnered little attention, we abandoned the exercise of reporting on same.

On a positive note, through the entrepreneurial efforts of our Library Director and staff, the library was able to create a revenue stream by becoming an official Passport acceptance facility. Some of these funds were used to purchase computers and thus improve our standing in the area of computer access. The funds to purchase these computers did not come from the library's operating budget.

As an additional point of reference, please note the library funding statistics for neighboring counties. The amount spent per capita in St. Johns and Volusia counties on library service is \$25 and \$38, respectively. The number of dollars spent per capita by Flagler County is \$9. By the way, the \$9 per capita spending on the library is not a monthly number, it is for the entire year.

Over the past 5 years, as tax revenue shortfalls caused the library budget to be cut year after year, the staff did its best to maintain service levels. But now it's gone too far. Beginning in October, the library now shuts its doors at 6 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, instead of the former closing time of 8 p.m. So, if you have a full time job, and want to go to the library one of those evenings, you're out of luck.

Several years ago, the Trustees offered the opinion that instead of making cuts that would affect the main library, the Bunnell branch should be closed. The undeniable logic of that position is that the loss of funds to the main library would negatively impact service levels to far more of our residents than closing a lightly used branch location. For reasons that were political and perhaps socioeconomic in nature, that option was taken off the table. The Trustees respect the decision by the Commissioners to take that position, but it did not serve to forestall the erosion of library service levels to the broader population.

As stated earlier, this report would be different than prior ones. Rather than commenting on the positive activities, here is a partial list of items that indicate the library is in a sorry state of affairs:

- 1) The library materials budget is inadequate, resulting in 50 to 75 or more patrons waiting for the opportunity to borrow a new release.
- 2) The library roof has leaked for several years, but the County seems to be content with letting it go indefinitely, even though we are located in a hurricane prone state.
- 3) Due to decreased facility maintenance, library professionals often find themselves cleaning bathrooms and picking up litter.
- 4) The hours of operation had to be reduced by 4 hours due to staff cuts. Do you know the library used to be open on Sundays?
- 5) There is no library service in the Hammock, the source of a generous portion of the County's tax revenue.
- 6) There are no funds being put aside for library expansion, or library service to growing or underserved areas of the County.
- 7) Our Library Director is arguably underpaid which puts us at risk of losing a highly qualified, well respected professional.
- 8) The Treasurer of the Friends group recently resigned citing personal reasons and frustration over the lack of support for the library.
- 9) Further to the above, volunteers are losing interest as their efforts are undermined by continued budget reductions.
- 10) As the de facto cultural center of the County, there is inadequate meeting space to accommodate the needs of various citizen groups.

Most of the above problems can be attributed to the relentless reduction in financial support for the library. This has to stop. The County cannot continue to put its hand in the cookie jar every time it needs some dollars. The Friends and volunteers have had their collective finger in the dyke for too long and it is not a long term remedy.

So, what can we do? The Board of Trustees believes that the library must be responsibly funded and immune from political considerations. Therefore, we propose that the County establish a Municipal Services Taxing Unit (MSTU) or some other more stable funding mechanism to operate the library and provide for future capital needs. We ask the Board of County Commissioners to take up this matter and to act on it without undue delay.

A public library offers a wonderful pathway to reading and learning. As a depository of the written and spoken word, one can find a wealth of beautiful prose rich with metaphors. As regards our library system, the ship is sinking, or the library is on life support are two inelegant metaphors that come to mind. It's time to set things straight and support your library properly.

Sincerely,

James Ulsamer, Chairman
Flagler County Library Board of Trustees

Trustees: Sharon Atack, Frank Benham, Jan Cullinane, Armando Mustiga, Ed Mylis,
Richard Nichols