

Miami Dade Library To Close Nearly Half its Branches

By Meredith Schwartz

Miami-Dade Public Library System (MDPLS) will have to cut 22 branches (out of 49), and 251 jobs, as well as reducing hours across the board, the *Miami Herald* reported on July 15. According to the *Herald*, the libraries were chosen based on geography and on whether they're based in county-owned buildings or rented storefronts.

The cuts are the result of a \$15 million library budget shortfall. (The system had been using leftover funds to bridge the gap for the past two years.) Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez recommended the budget which necessitates the cuts, as well as which cuts should be made, to the county commissioners, who approved his recommendation on July 16.

Once the commissioners set the preliminary rate, it can be lowered but not raised. Throughout August, there will be six town hall meetings to explain the proposed budget to residents and receive feedback. On September 10 and September 16, there will be budget hearings. The commissioners will vote on the budget at the September 16 meeting, and it will take effect on October 1.

But though the millage can't be raised, Raymond Santiago, director of the Miami-Dade Public Library System and *LJ*'s 2003 Librarian of the Year, hasn't given up on mitigating the worst of the impacts. He called the cuts presented to the commissioners and detailed above "a worst-case scenario," and "probably the most drastic of all the options."

"Before the final budget vote in September," Santiago continued, "the administration will continue to investigate options to reduce these negative impacts" through different adjustments to the library budget. "We're looking at everything right now," he said.

Mayor Gimenez told a local news channel, "people have said that the age of the library is probably ending." That's news to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which found that in 2010 (the most recent year surveyed) public libraries saw 1.57 billion visits, an increase of 32.7 percent over the year 2000. In Miami-Dade itself, in the half year from October 2012-April 2013, the library circulated 5.3 million materials (including computer usage) and saw 3.6 million visits.

"The commission's vote is going to take away a lot of very important community programs" including adult and childhood literacy programs and resume creation workshops, [John Quick](#), president of the Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library, told *LJ*. "The commission...kept talking about books, but the library is so much more than books. Such a large percentage of the population of Miami-Dade does not have access to the Internet; they get that from the public library system. These are the things people need to survive, to earn a living: in this day and age, a lot of the job postings [are] on the Internet."

Quick said the Friends of the MDPL is going to "go down every avenue and turn over every rock" to help the library make up the missing funding, including exploring state, national, and corporate sources, as well as traditional fundraising activities. "But it is such a large amount, more than 50 percent of the library's operating budget," he said. "The book sale is great, but it is not going to make \$31 million."

Faye C. Roberts, Executive Director of the Florida Library Association, provided some context, telling *LJ*, “Although property values in Florida are beginning to rebound, the state recently increased counties’ contributions to the state retirement system while also reducing Medicaid payments, creating a financial squeeze for local governments. This is a particular problem in Miami-Dade, where more than 20 percent of residents receive food stamps and the unemployment rate is among the highest in the state. Eliminating 251 jobs and closing 22 libraries is a major blow in Miami-Dade, where more than 100 library workers were laid off just two years ago. This loss of trained library staff comes at a time when they’re needed more than ever.”

Santiago agreed, saying, “We’re faced with, ‘what can you do with the money you have?’ There are a number of unfunded mandates that are coming from the state, and, being the biggest county in the state, it has an enormous impact. The recovery hasn’t been as rapid as anybody would like.”

A changing situation

There have been substantial changes to the mayor’s budget since it was first proposed, less than a week ago. Gimenez originally suggested a roughly 5 percent property tax increase to fill the library’s budget gap, along with a similar gap in Miami-Dade County’s fire-rescue budget, and to convert the county’s animal shelter to a ‘no-kill’ model. However, under criticism from commissioners and citizens alike, Gimenez first reduced the amount of the increase by removing the funds for the shelter conversion, and finally walked back the proposed increase altogether. He is now proposing no new taxes as part of his budget, except for tax increases which voters approved a decade ago as part of a bond issue.

When it comes to libraries versus taxes, Gimenez seems to be damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. He suggested shuttering 13 libraries two years ago, according to the *Herald*, but “received so much pushback from county commissioners” that this time he decided to suggest a tax-rate hike instead. However, his quick reversal on the hike is not surprising; Gimenez’s predecessor, Mayor Carlos Alvarez, was removed in a recall election in 2011 for raising property taxes.

The *Herald* quoted Gimenez as saying the initial cuts contemplated included closing 42 libraries. (As infoDOCKET noted, the *Herald* briefly reported that earlier plan, as well as the layoffs, several days ago, before the story was pulled without explanation.)

Suzy Trutie, assistant director of communications, Miami-Dade County, explained how officials arrived at the proposed cuts. “The Mayor consults with Deputy Mayors and Department Directors on what services, programs and employees will be affected,” Trutie told *LJ*. “It is ultimately the Mayor’s decision to make recommendations to the Commission. However, the Commission can direct the Mayor to make changes to the budget.”

The number of proposed branch closures was ultimately reduced because the mayor instead told the library to keep more libraries open and reduce operating hours instead. Libraries that are now open five days a week may go down to four days, and those open six days may go down to five, according to Gimenez. A new planned northeast branch slated to open next year would still be opened. And the county’s bookmobiles, listed as a possible cut in an earlier *Herald* report, are not affected and will remain in service, Trutie told *LJ*.