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Miami-Dade reduces number of libraries on chopping block to four

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Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, who last month warned that 22 of the county's 49 public libraries could be shut down this fall due to deep budget cuts, announced Thursday that his administration now expects to shutter only four.

The dramatic reduction, while welcome news to library supporters who have campaigned to keep the facilities open, still comes with plenty of pain. Libraries across the board will likely shorten their hours and be staffed by fewer librarians.

Though the number of closures has shrunk to less than 10 percent of the existing libraries — compared to nearly half under the worst-case scenario — the number of proposed layoffs has not gone down by the same proportion. The latest estimate has 192 library workers losing their jobs, down from 251.

“Our plan, however, will include the increase of part-time librarian positions,” Gimenez wrote in a memo to commissioners Thursday. “We know that implementing this plan will require modified schedules including the reduction of days and hours for some branches.”

Of the four libraries still facing the ax, one is the library system's Civic Center kiosk. The other three branches: Country Walk, Sunset and Tamiami.

The list won't be finalized until commissioners vote on the 2013-14 budget after two public hearings in September.

Gimenez's administration is determining each library's hours of operations, based in part on input from neighbors, said Lisa Martinez, a senior advisor to the mayor whose portfolio includes the library department.

“We want to make sure we make those decisions with community input,” she said.

In addition to savings from employing fewer workers and keeping shorter hours, the county renegotiated the leases for some of the libraries housed in privately owned commercial properties.

The library department will also save nearly \$2.4 million a year in rent payments to Miami-Dade's general fund by downsizing the Main Library in downtown Miami, which will keep its two floors serving the public but eliminate third-floor offices and a storage basement. The building is owned by the county's internal services department, which is funded from taxes separate from the ones that fund libraries.

The diminished Main Library rent went a long way to saving other branches, Martinez said.

Since recommending a flat property-tax rate last month that would require slashing the library and fire-rescue budgets, Gimenez has steadily whittled down the number of libraries on the chopping block. His update last week shrunk the list to 13.

Two weeks ago, Gimenez had pledged to commissioners that the county would maintain at least 35 libraries open. That number now stands at 45.

Keeping more libraries open, even with limited staffing and hours, will make it easier to grow the system in the future than if facilities were shut down, said **attorney John J. Quick**, president of the Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library, the system's fundraising arm.

"It's a lot easier to expand programs at an existing library" than open new ones, he said.

Though the fluid budget process can sometimes seem chaotic, it's not unusual for governments to lay out the steepest proposed cuts when tax rates are approved and then find fat to trim elsewhere before the spending plan obtains final approval. Miami-Dade has also revised some of its initial proposed cuts to fire and rescue trucks and firefighter layoffs.

Library backers have campaigned on social media and with phone calls, emails and rallies to save libraries. Gimenez had initially called for raising the tax rate to maintain library services but flipped after finding little political support.

Martinez will continue to meet with nonprofit organizations and city governments to find ways to work together on programs, staffing or shared space.

To soften the blow of the cuts, for example, the Miami-Dade School Board will open five school libraries to the public starting on the first day of classes.

Beginning Monday, the public will have access on weekdays to books, the Internet and other resources at media centers at the following locations: D.A. Dorsey Educational Center, 7100 NW 17th Ave., Lindsey Hopkins Technical Center, 750 NW 20th St., Miami Lakes Educational Center, 5780 NW 158th St., Miami Lakes; Robert Morgan Educational Center, 18180 SW 122nd Ave., and South Dade Educational Center, 109 NE Eighth St., Homestead.

The five media centers are located in educational technical centers that already have expanded hours, according to the district. Extra costs associated with the move will be paid for through a grant. Operating hours vary.

In a memo to school board members, Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said the district hopes to sign an agreement with the county to see if any other district media centers might be opened to the public.

The county has also unveiled a plan to open centers at 11 parks that will offer free computer and Internet access, as public libraries do.

Miami Herald staff writer David Smiley contributed to this report.