

Miami-Dade libraries, fire stations to bear brunt of proposed budget cuts

By Patricia Mazzei pmazzei@miamiherald.com

The slowdown has been “due to traffic congestion and expansion of coverage area without adding Fire Rescue stations,” according to the budget.

Three of the trucks slated for elimination are in South Miami-Dade, noted Capt. Rob Dubé of the Goulds fire station. That means the remaining units would have to absorb an additional 9,500 calls a year, he said.

“It’s just going to be tough to fill those holes,” said Dubé, whose engine is on the chopping block. “The population is increasing. It’s going to affect people’s lives.”

One fire station, in Eastern Shores, would shut down entirely, because its sole rescue truck would be eliminated. The department briefly closed that station last year, saying it averaged less than one call a day. But it was reopened two months later because response times were averaging nearly eight minutes.

However, there’s a chance the fire-rescue department will be able to soften the blow to its roughly \$345 million budget. There are 67 stations with 139 fire trucks.

Fire Chief Dave Downey and Rowan Taylor, president of the International Association of Firefighters Local 1403, have talked about idling trucks across the county for rotating 12-hour shifts instead of eliminating units altogether, an action known as a “rolling brown-out.” That would achieve some savings through reduced overtime, though equipment and buildings would still have to be maintained.

Taylor said the union, which would have to approve that step, would be willing to agree “so that we don’t impact one community alone” and to protect some jobs.

“We’re willing to concede on certain things to save those recruits,” he said.

The department is already 100 firefighters short, according to Downey.

“I never thought it would come to this,” said Downey, who envisioned growing the department when he became chief in January. “I really didn’t.”

Library administrators, on the other hand, will have much less wiggle room to avoid cuts in their \$36 million budget.

The county will look at whether the department can contribute less money to the general fund for administrative costs, Gimenez said, but he warned that those adjustments would not be enough to save the libraries targeted for closure. Even with the closures, the remaining ones would likely have to be closed one more day a week.

“The age of the book, unfortunately, I think is waning,” he said at Tuesday’s commission meeting — a comment that quickly sparked criticism online from library supporters.

Raymond Santiago, the department’s director, said libraries have adapted to changes in technology by including DVDs and e-books in their collections, and by providing computers and free Internet access. That service allows patrons, particularly in poorer communities with limited Internet access, to fill out applications for public housing and jobs that are only available online.

“There’s an enormous digital divide in the county,” Santiago told the board.

He added that he’s often driven by closed libraries at night and seen people sitting in their cars with their laptops open, using the free wireless Internet that bleeds outside the buildings.

For children out of school over the summer, most libraries have partnered with a nonprofit to serve free lunches paid for by the federal government.

The 22 libraries slated for closure were chosen based on geography, usage and costs; half are the ones housed in commercial storefronts where the county must pay rent, Santiago said. Among those are the popular West Kendall Regional (in a storefront) and Golden Glades branch (in a county-owned building).

The communities that would be hit hardest by the closures: Southwest Miami-Dade and less affluent neighborhoods in the county's urban core, including Opa-locka, Lemon City, Shenandoah and Tamiami.

Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library, the system's fundraising arm, last week began its annual campaign to get 10,000 people to each donate \$10 by Oct. 10 to support library programs, including those that teach children and adults how to read. Supporters have also taken to Twitter and Change.org, a petition-gathering website, to urge commissioners to keep the libraries open.

"Each commissioner is concerned about the closing of specific libraries, probably in their districts," said **John J. Quick**, the Friends group president. "We have to close nearly half of the libraries, so there is going to be impact felt throughout the county."