

The Miami Herald

10A | MONDAY, JUNE 30, 2014

H1

MiamiHerald.com | MIAMI HERALD

OPINION

JOHN S. KNIGHT (0194-1900)

ALEXANDRA VILLOCH, PUBLISHER | AMINDA MARQUES GONZALEZ, EXECUTIVE EDITOR | NANCY ANCRUM, EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

JAMES L. KNIGHT (0909-8990)

MIAMI HERALD | EDITORIAL

The latest chapter

OUR OPINION: Miami-Dade residents can't have both viable libraries and no tax increase

Once upon a time, libraries were so valued in Miami-Dade that the main branch sat on prime downtown bayfront property. Back in 1950, erecting a library blocking the bayview seemed perfectly justified. Libraries were that central to daily life.

Libraries remain a potent community presence that have evolved to serve both a tech-savvy, information-driven customer base and residents who have few choices to obtain the information they need to find the essentials, be it a job or a book.

As Miami-Dade County's budget season begins July 15, commissioners will take up the emotional topic of funding public libraries, an endangered species fiscally speaking. They'd better brace

themselves.

The fates of 49 branches, 90 employees and 4 million books are at stake. Last year's public hearings were boisterous; next month's should be no different. However, commissioners have two choices to keep libraries viable countywide. Each demands someone sacrifice something. Elected officials better find the backbone to make a persuasive case for their ultimate choice. Not everyone is going to be thrilled.

Here's the breakdown: Libraries get about \$30 million annually from a county taxing district. Their current \$50 million budget is being propped up by dwindling cash reserves. Next year, libraries need about \$20-million from the money-strapped county to avoid

staffing reductions and cuts in operating hours.

Last week, Mr. Gimenez floated a new library rescue budget plan for \$45 million — \$5 million less than the current budget. The mayor proposes a slight cut in property taxes, an increase in the special property tax for libraries and the shifting of \$12 million in the operating budget. Homeowners would pay the same overall tax rate — a promise made by Mr. Gimenez after a public outcry for no new taxes.

Book lovers and grassroots groups like Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library, Community Advocates for Libraries in Miami and the Coalition to Save our Libraries have come to the rescue. Certainly a worthy cause. They

want the libraries long-standing \$64-million budget restored. That would mean no branch closings or staff reductions — plus additional services.

The county's options are limited because the financing for libraries comes from the separate library property tax. The mayor cannot dip into the general revenue fund to pay for libraries.

But with that restriction comes a different flexibility, library advocates say. The commission can vote to raise the millage rate for only the library taxing district to fund the \$64-million budget. Under that plan, homeowners in the taxing district would pay an additional \$17 per \$100,000 of value. That's what advocates will ask commissioners to set in motion.

John Quick, head of Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library, says a survey conducted by the mayor's library task force shows support. "People said they were willing to support a fully funded library budget to sustain excellent services," Mr. Quick told the Editorial Board. But a recent Miami Herald poll indicates the opposite.

Commissioners, unwilling to raise taxes or to cut services, can't have it both ways. Neither can Miami-Dade residents who, at long last, must accept that if they truly value libraries, they will have to pay more for them, just as they voted to give financial boosts to Jackson Memorial and the school district.

The bottom line: Pay more or accept less. It's that simple.