

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

## Without more tax dollars, Miami-Dade library system would fire more than half its full-time staff



Joseph Gonzalez, 7, looks for a book at the West Kendall library in this March 2014 file photo. PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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Without more tax dollars, Miami-Dade County's library system would fire 56 percent of its full-time staff and bring on part-time workers to operate branches that will see hours cut by an average of 35 percent, according to a document released Thursday.

The draft budget assumes no increase in the coming fiscal year in the special property tax that funds the library system, which has been relying on cash reserves since 2010. The tax currently generates \$30 million, but the library's budget is \$50 million and

cash reserves are forecast to be gone by the fall. Mayor Carlos Gimenez says he will not endorse higher taxes without a referendum, leaving library administrators to map out how they would manage a 40 percent drop in funding.

The plan assumes no branch closings. Gimenez instructed library director Raymond Santiago to fashion a \$30 million budget with all 49 branches, after facing a firestorm last year when the mayor proposed saving dollars by closing some of the less popular branches.

Santiago released the plan Thursday as part of a public-records request by The Miami Herald. Library advocates had been pressing Gimenez and library administrators to detail how a \$50 million budget would be slashed to \$30 million, and the draft spending plan shows savings would come from dismantling the current payroll.

The plan shows a current staff of 445 full-time workers dropping 249 positions, to 196, while part-time staff would increase from 41 people to 63. That would result in a total staff of about 259 people, a reduction of 47 percent. Overall payroll expenses would drop by about \$12 million, a 50 percent savings, while the library system would save an additional \$4 million in costs tied to worker benefits.

Gimenez said moving forward with a plan to present an alternative budget with more tax revenue for the library system, as well as for parks and cultural activities.

Lisa Martinez, Gimenez's chief of staff, said the budget was created as part of a task force the mayor ran to devise options for the looming funding shortfall. "It is what the library professionals prepared to be able to sustain service at the highest levels with the funds available to them," she said.

Even when then-Mayor Carlos Alvarez ushered in an unpopular tax increase in 2010, his budget also cut the library tax by about 26 percent. Gimenez presided over another 37 percent tax cut after taking office in 2011, and the library's yearly budget is down nearly 40 percent under his administration.

The new budget offers more fodder to library advocates' budding campaign to push for a tax increase in order to fund a \$64 million budget and reserve some of the scheduling and book-buying cuts already imposed under Gimenez. The American Library Association in March urged Gimenez to reject the \$30 million option, saying Miami-Dade's library system already spends less per person on books and other materials than almost any other library in the nation.

Cutting \$20 million from the library's budget "would have a significant negative impact on the residents of the county, in particular on the children of the county, and would jeopardize the very future of the community," the association wrote in a March 18 letter to Gimenez.

Advocates are lobbying commissioners to back a higher tax, with hope that an upcoming recommendation from the county's library advisory group for a \$64 million budget will spur a string of public endorsements.

Currently, the library tax costs about \$17.25 for every \$100,000 of a property's valuation. To fund the current \$50 million budget, the tax would be about \$28.40 for every \$100,000 and roughly \$35 for a \$64 million budget.

In an email, Santiago called the \$30 million spending plan a preliminary draft ahead of the county-wide budget process set to last several months. His official budget proposal, made public several weeks ago, calls for spending \$55 million but also shows a \$22 million funding shortfall.

Santiago had already released scheduling details behind the \$30 million plan. Most library branches would shave a day off their current five-day schedules, and the number of libraries open just four hours daily would grow to 19, from the current 12.

**John Quick, president of the Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library, described the draft budget as designed to starve the library system to the point that closing branches will be easier in future years. "I look at this proposal as a self-fulfilling prophecy," he said. "Nobody's going to use it. Because there will be nothing to use."**

Gimenez has floated the idea of holding a non-binding referendum in August to ask voters to endorse higher taxes for libraries, parks and cultural activities. In his March 31 written "budget address" to Miami-Dade residents, Gimenez said: "Short of any public referendum approving additional taxes, I will not recommend any tax rate increase for" the budget year that begins Oct. 1.

The mayor must present a budget to commissioners by July 1, and has said he may propose two budgets: one assuming a tax increase, and one without.