

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Higher library tax in Miami-Dade “maintains the status quo”



Seven-year-old Joseph Gonzalez looks for a book at the West Kendall library in this file photo from March 17, 2014. PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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The higher library tax endorsed by Miami-Dade commissioners Tuesday will probably still leave the county's 49 branches juggling five-day schedules, employing a full-time staff 30 percent smaller than it was three years ago, and managing a book budget that's a fraction of what it was before the recession.

Tuesday's commission vote allowing a sharp rise in the county's library tax does avert a looming budget crisis for the library system, which has been relying on cash reserves for several years. And it would give Mayor Carlos Gimenez the extra money needed to avoid a cost-cutting plan to eliminate 90 full-time library jobs in favor of part-time positions.

But the extra tax dollars would mean a 6 percent increase for the current \$50 million library budget, and bring it roughly on par with what administrators said was needed to maintain current services.

"The budget doesn't offer any enhancements," said **John Quick, a Miami lawyer and head of the Friends of the Miami-Dade Public Library** group pushing for a \$64 million library budget. "It maintains the status quo from the cuts over the last several years."

A day after the closely watched commission vote setting next year's maximum tax rates, the impact of the library decision remains unclear.

Commissioners accepted Gimenez's plan to slightly lower the property taxes that fund countywide services and the Miami-Dade fire department. Gimenez proposed the slight drop in those rates to make room for an increase in the library tax. But rather than keep the combined rates flat as Gimenez requested, commissioners voted for a slightly higher increase in the library tax than the one laid out in the mayor's plan.

During the meeting, Gimenez said that the higher library tax would likely mean no layoffs in the library system. But on Wednesday, his spokesman said the extra dollars could still go to replacing full-time workers with a larger number of part-time workers or to fix neglected maintenance needs.

"Do we want to avoid layoffs? Absolutely," said Mike Hernández, the mayor's communications director. "With that said, we also want to make sure libraries are run as efficiently as possible."

Gimenez has until July 25 to veto the library-tax plan, which passed by an 8-to-5 vote. And while a veto would spark an override fight, Hernández did not have critical words for the commission's vote.

"It's not exactly what we wanted," he said. "We are going to evaluate every possible scenario."

Commissioners can still set lower tax rates when they adopt the county's budget in the fall, but Tuesday's vote established a ceiling that's unlikely to change once adopted. With Gimenez winning approval of the non-library rates, he

kept intact the revenue plan behind a budget that proposes police cuts, transit-fare hikes and other austerity measures he said are needed without union concessions.

Library revenue makes up a tiny portion of Miami-Dade's yearly \$1.3 billion **property-tax** budget. Currently, the four property taxes that fund county operations— one each for countywide services, services for unincorporated Miami-Dade, the fire department and libraries — cost roughly \$925 for every \$100,000 of a property's assessed value. The Gimenez budget would have kept the combined total flat, while the rates approved by commissioners would increase the overall rate to \$929, thanks to the higher library tax.

Gimenez proposed a 38 percent increase in the library tax, from the current level of about \$17 per \$100,000 to \$24. The commission-endorsed rate would move that cost to \$28 per \$100,000. The sharp increases were needed to avoid a funding crisis once cash reserves are exhausted this fall. Currently, the library tax generates about \$30 million a year.

If it stands, the commission decision essentially resets the library tax to where it was before Gimenez took office in 2011. The newly elected mayor secured a 12 percent cut in the county's combined tax rate, and libraries took the biggest hit with a nearly 40 percent reduction. The drop for libraries came on the heels of 25-percent cut under the administration of Gimenez's predecessor, Carlos Alvarez.

At the time, libraries had amassed more than \$70 million in **reserves** during the boom years of property taxes, and county leaders used the surplus cash to fill some of the revenue gaps caused by the tax cuts. Staffing cuts that began in 2009 picked up steam under Gimenez, with the system's payroll down 28 percent in three years to the current count of 450 full-time workers, according to county budget documents.

Early estimates from the county's budget office show the tax rates commissioners approved Tuesday mean an additional \$8 million for the library system. That would bring the library budget to about \$53 million. This spring, library administrators said increased benefit expenses and other costs meant it would cost \$55 million to maintain current services.

Gimenez had proposed a \$45 million library budget, with savings coming from eliminating 90 full-time positions and replacing them with about 60 part-time workers. The system's acquisitions budget, which includes books and electronic materials, would increase from about \$1.3 million to \$1.5 million, according to draft budget submissions. In 2008, Miami-Dade libraries spent \$6 million on acquisitions.

Shifting personnel dollars from full-time to **part-time workers** would give library administrators the flexibility to improve operating hours, Gimenez said. His budget proposed restoring Sunday service to the county's major library branches, but usually by closing on another day instead.

A draft schedule provided by the budget office shows the North Dade regional library closing on Fridays next year in order to be open on Sundays, while the Northeast branch would gain a day and be open all weekend in exchange for closing on Friday.

Library advocates and employees had pushed commissioners to approve a tax high enough to generate \$64 million in the first year, with hopes of expanding hours and beefing up the acquisitions budget. With the vote for a more modest increase, advocates aren't declaring victory.

"It's not a completely hollow loss, but we're very disappointed," said Ricci Yuhico, a **librarian** at the North Dade branch and co-founder of an advocacy group pushing for more funding. "We feel the commissioners didn't fully understand what the \$64 million budget could have given us."