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THE READERS' FORUM

Preliminary library tax rate must survive

County commissioners praised the hundreds of residents who descended upon Government Center recently to plead for a \$64 million library budget for the coming year. Commissioners settled on a less ambitious course, approving a slight increase above Mayor Carlos Gimenez's recommended tax rate to avert further service cuts and layoffs of an additional 90 librarians.

If the preliminary library tax rate survives the mayor's veto pen Friday, our libraries will operate with roughly the same budget as the current year reversing the recent downward trend and beginning a rebuilding process.

The unfortunate reality is that, with this status quo budget, library services will remain strained; technology upgrades and facility maintenance will be delayed; long waiting periods for best-selling books will continue; and implementation of the YOUmedia digital program for South Dade teenagers and restoration of services, such as weekend tutoring for children as well as adult literacy training, will remain out of reach.

Despite questions from Commissioner Lynda Bell regarding the origins of the \$64 million request, it was not blindly advanced by advocates. The figure resulted from a thorough analysis of what would be required to begin the implementation of the recommendations of the Mayor's Library Taskforce earlier this year. The suggested budget was adopted by the Library Advisory Board, which was created, and whose duty it is to advise and make recommendations to the commission on our public library system, and was subsequently endorsed by the Friends of the Miami-Dade Library and other organizations throughout the community.

We are indebted to the library champions on the commission who supported the \$64 million budget: Commissioners Xavier Suarez, Barbara Jordan, Bruno Barreiro, Dennis Moss and Jean Monestime. We also thank Commissioner Sally Heyman for the pragmatic counter proposal that was subsequently adopted with eight votes which holds the line on further service cuts and layoffs and commissioners Audrey Edmonson and Lynda Bell who supported this compromise. We must now hold the mayor's administration to its word on the preservation of every last full-time library position, as insisted upon by Ms. Jordan and others.

We applaud the thousands who signed petitions in support of the \$64 million budget. Yet, our job is far from over. County commissioners can still lower the library tax rate in September, so we must redouble our efforts to hold the line against reductions and layoffs and continue to build upon what has been accomplished so far by our citizens and library patrons.

John Quick,
Coalition to Save Our Libraries,