

## **Library use rises in tough financial times**

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Uncertain economic times are driving up the traffic at local libraries.

"With the downturn in the economy, library use has gone way, way up," said Cathy Matyas, the chief librarian at Waterloo Public Library.

"Our business is really booming now."

Circulation at the Waterloo Library has gone up six per cent this year, along with a 30 per cent jump in applications for library cards.

Kitchener Public Library circulation has jumped 12 per cent. The increase has been less dramatic at Cambridge Libraries and Galleries, where use is up by only two per cent.

Borrowing DVDs and magazines -- entertainment items that are costly to buy -- are up at the libraries, too. "They're coming to us in greater numbers for entertainment," Matyas said.

Other library services in greater demand are free internet access and wifi, how-to materials, and help with job searches and resumes, Matyas said.

Marzio Apolloni, the chair of the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, is leading the lobby for more provincial funding.

Increased library use is part of a North American-wide trend related to a downturn in the economy, said Apolloni, director of the Bruce County Public Library.

"What they're using the library for is to support themselves during this time the economy is not as bright and rosy as it used to be," he said.

Bruce County reported a four per cent increase across its more than 15 branches, which Apolloni called significant. And the increase would have been double that if the busy Port Elgin branch hadn't been closed.

The 100-year-old branch closed in the spring for a major revamping and expansion and will reopen in the new year.

The Lucknow branch was also closed for several weeks this summer for renovations.

Apolloni said libraries are often the first to see cuts when budgets get tight, but he argues that "makes no sense." "As one person quipped, it's like dehorning the cows because the chickens have stopped laying eggs," he said. A decade ago, the Ontario government cut grants to libraries by more than 40 per cent.

Municipalities now spend half a billion dollars on libraries compared with the province's contribution of less than \$30 million in grants.

## **The library - a recession sanctuary**

By Derrick Z. Jackson, Globe Columnist, January 3, 2009, Boston Globe

IN A SPEECH a month ago to the nation's governors, 41 of whom he said were likely to face budget shortfalls, President-elect Obama said, "Jobs are being cut. Programs for the needy are at risk. Libraries are being closed. . . ." Libraries are a rhetorical anchor for Obama, from his 2008 campaign promise to "connect our schools and

libraries" to the Internet to his 2004 Democratic convention speech where he said, "we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries."

This week, senior Obama advisor David Axelrod said support for libraries is still part of the stimulus package, "refurbishing the nation's classrooms and labs and libraries so our kids can compete."

That is, if the libraries first avoid being trampled.

Obama's library lament to governors came in Philadelphia, where Mayor Michael Nutter says he must shutter 11 of 54 branches in cuts of "epic proportions." This is part of a silent tragedy. Library systems across the nation face cuts and closures at the very moment they have become recession sanctuaries.

Checkouts of books, CDs, and DVDs are up 15 percent at the main library in Modesto, Calif. In Boulder, Colo., circulation of job-hunting materials is up 14 percent. Usage of the Newark Public Library in New Jersey is up 17 percent. Library card requests have increased 27 percent in the last half of 2008 in San Francisco. The Boise Public Library reported a 61 percent increase in new library cards in 2008. In Brantley County, Georgia, library computer usage was up 26 percent in the last quarter.

"Some have said their computer at home was all torn up," Brantley library manager Kathy Moody told the Florida Times-Union. "Others have said they don't have Internet service or they had to drop their service."

In Washoe County, Nevada, library director Arnold Maurins credited early voting for a 9 percent or 10 percent increase in library usage that has stuck. "I think it's kind of a common-sense conclusion that people are looking for less expensive ways to meet their reading or recreation needs," Maurins told the Associated Press. "They can go to a program that's free instead of paying \$20 to go to the movies."

In Kern County, California, where Diane Duquette has been library director for 22 years, library checkouts were up 19 percent in the last quarter. She told the Bakersfield Californian, "We've never had that kind of increase before. Wow. In my time here, we've maybe had a 1 percent or 2 percent increase in good years."

The Boston Public Library is no different. New library cards are up 32.7 percent from July to November of 2008, compared with the same period in 2007. Visits are up 13 percent, from 1.4 million visits to 1.6 million. Checkouts of books, CDs, and DVDs are up 7.2 percent overall over the last fiscal year. More telling is that checkouts have soared between 27 percent and 37 percent at the Egleston Square, Fields Corner, Jamaica Plain, and Orient Heights branches.

New BPL president Amy Ryan said a baby story program at the Copley library has grown from fluctuating between 60 and 80 families to well over 100. Monthly visits to a free Internet homework tutoring service have doubled from 300 to 600. She said anecdotal reports indicate a spike in people using branch libraries to research new careers or returning to school. This is despite the BPL probably facing cuts, too.

"Libraries are unfortunately used to this," Ryan said. "But the essential role of the library cannot be duplicated in anybody's home, when you consider the combination of manuals, books, and librarian expertise," Ryan said. "In down economic times, families aren't going out to spend a lot of money on books and movies. This is when the branches can shine as a community gathering place and at a time when people are seeking answers to life improvement."

Libraries are shining so brightly in this recession, the nation's politicians - from Obama to the mayors - must keep their lights flickering. Obama says he wants to link all libraries to the Internet. You cannot connect them if the doors are locked.

## **Check it out: As the economy sags, library use is booming. But will the services people want survive the budget cuts towns fear?**

By Keith O'Brien, Globe Staff, January 4, 2009, Boston Globe

Story time has always been a popular event at the Thomas Crane Public Library in Quincy. But last fall, when children's librarian Jane Miller reported to work to register families for her story time classes, she could hardly believe what was waiting for her: a long line, snaking through the library, out the door, down the block, and into the parking lot.

"I was shocked," Miller said. "Shocked. In the nine years I've been here, I had never seen such a line before for any of our story times."

In the fast-paced, instant message, Internet era, public libraries have often struggled for attention from patrons. But with the economy sputtering, unemployment rising, and no relief in sight, Massachusetts libraries, long the victim of budget cuts, are busier than ever before, said Robert Maier, director of the state Board of Library Commissioners.

Attendance is surging. Check-out rates are soaring. At some libraries, circulation - the number of items checked out in a given month - is up as much as 33 percent since last summer. And for the unemployed, libraries have become something like an office, with computers, Internet access, and even classes that teach how to write a résumé and peddle it online. In a tough time, it seems, people are returning to a place where whispering trumps shouting and no credit card is necessary. At the library, just about everything is free.

"It's classic," said Deborah Abraham, the library director in Everett, where circulation is up more than 23 percent in the first five months of this fiscal year. "When the economy is bad, library use goes up. That's pretty clear. It has happened before, and it certainly seems like it's happening again."

The trend, playing out nationwide, has librarians celebrating, but worrying, too. The same financial crisis squeezing pocketbooks, pushing people to borrow - not buy - books and DVDs, is gutting state and local budgets as well. And so at a time when demand for library services is growing, libraries themselves, which rely on state and local aid, could be facing cuts in 2009.

"It'd be nice to be rolling in money," said Amy E. Ryan, president of the Boston Public Library, where budget cuts are expected this year despite a 7 percent increase in circulation since last July. "But this is a time to really be thinking about our priorities at the Boston Public Library. How do we reach more people? And how do we deliver the best services? We need to change. We need to change with the times."

Libraries have been changing for years, repositioning themselves to attract patrons in a digital age. In recent years, libraries have expanded their DVD collections, opened Internet cafes, attracted children with video game hours, and even used technology to let people download music and video.

Such efforts have helped increase library circulation in Massachusetts ever so slightly in each of the last nine years, even as funding in many communities has been flat or falling. The key reason, according to state data, is patrons' growing interest in borrowing DVDs, books on CD, and other audio-visual materials.

But historically, nothing boosts the profile of a public library like a nice, dreadful recession, and this one is shaping up as a doozy. Maier estimates that circulation is up as much as 7 percent statewide since last July, and some communities can barely keep up with demand.

Circulation is up more than 33 percent in tiny Groveland - population 6,900 - and 30 percent in Milford. West Dennis, Essex, Everett, and Franklin have all recorded 20 percent increases or higher in the first five months of this fiscal year.

The Boston Public Library's branches are thriving. Many libraries saw even larger increases in December. In Groveland last month, circulation was up a stunning 88 percent, said Deb Hoadley, the library director there.

"We are air conditioned. We have heat. So people who may not have those things, we're available to them," said Hoadley. "And also, we have the resources that they're looking for. There are computers and techniques for career building. Especially in these times, people need to have access to the Internet and have somebody help them."

Such services are invaluable - especially now - to people such as Miguel Lopez, a 24-year-old unemployed parking garage attendant. Out of work since October, he's been spending his days lately at the Egleston Square Branch Library in Boston, working on his résumé. Without the library, he said, he doesn't know where he would go.

And without the library, Kathleen Foster, a mother of two, would still be spending a lot of money on books.

"In the past, I would take the girls to Borders, or Barnes & Noble, and let them pick out a book," said Foster one day last week, walking the aisles of the Thomas Crane Public Library in Quincy with her daughters, Abigail, 8, and Clare, 6. "I just don't do that now. We come here instead."

That's good news for libraries, said Maier. But still, he's worried about the year ahead. Just last week, Governor Deval Patrick announced that the state may face a \$1 billion shortfall in the months ahead, which could mean cuts in local aid.

Cities and towns - often unwilling to slash funding for education or police and fire services - have turned repeatedly in recent years to the library for cuts. In some cases, Maier said, cuts have gutted libraries, and he's worried about that happening again this year.

"I'm very concerned for residents of towns that may wind up with a library that is a shadow of what it has been," he said, "one that may be open, but really has no library services."

In the meantime, however, librarians such as Miller, in Quincy, will be working harder than ever to keep up with demand.

After the long lines for her story time sessions last fall, Miller switched to a lottery system to determine who got a story time spot. But that confused people, she said. And so recently, she decided there will be no more registration for the children's story time programs.

Instead, starting at the end of this month, every Quincy resident will be accepted, she said, even if it means that classes once limited to 10 children balloon in size.

"It could be 50 people," she said recently, shaking her head. But Miller plans to take all comers.

"The problem is," she said, "I hate refusing."