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HEADLINE: Library system must cut back, says CEO

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BODY:

An estimated 7 percent cut in the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library operating budget has board members blaming property tax caps as they scramble to avoid program reductions, layoffs and branch closures.

Although the actual percentage of the cuts won't be known until the budget is passed later this year, said library CEO Laura Bramble, cutbacks are definitely in the future.

"It's too soon to discuss what exactly the options are. We're looking at a combination of things," Bramble said.

In 2009, the library had an operating budget of \$43.2 million, according to library figures. This year, it is proposing to slash that to about \$40 million.

Although the proposed 2010 budget includes a 2 percent pay increase and higher spending on benefits for the more than 700 employees at 23 branches, the \$3.2 million in cuts combined with reduced revenue from property taxes could mean layoffs or branch closures are on the way.

The Library Board has not decided whether it will close branches, but if it does, the East Washington Branch Library, in one of the oldest buildings in Marion County and in need of updates, could be a target. The 1909 library was one of the first branches built using a grant from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation and has undergone only minor renovations in the past 20 years.

More budget cuts could mean other branches might not get the attention they need and might have to close their doors.

Chip Gibson, a library patron and president of the Near Eastside Community Organization board, said people always seem to be milling around the steps of the East Washington Branch, but he knows the newer Spades Park Branch Library nearby is more accessible because it has wheelchair ramps and elevators.

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"Libraries like the East Washington Street location have some historical significance as well as meaning a lot to the community they serve," Gibson said. He said losing even one location could hurt the neighborhood and schools.

Furthermore, said City-County Councilwoman Jackie Nytes, a professional librarian for 30 years, it would mean low-income neighborhoods that surround some Marion County libraries wouldn't have the computer and Internet access that people need to find jobs.

"In our lower-income communities or those where there's high unemployment, people are using the library now more than ever," said Nytes, a Democrat. "You don't want to be closing down the libraries in the low-income communities where people don't have transportation to get to a bigger one."

It might make sense to close the smaller libraries to cut costs, Nytes said, but it's important to consider that bigger libraries generally are in communities where people have higher incomes and could drive elsewhere if their branch closed.

Councilwoman Barbara Malone, a Republican who chairs the Municipal Corporations Committee, said the relocation of the Marion County Law Library -- which moved from the City-County Building to Central Library in January because of budget cuts -- has inconvenienced many who use it for research.

"Many of us can't afford the cost of expensive online research, so it was nice having the law library available," she said.

Despite scaling back on printing and delivery costs and refinancing the library's debt to save more than \$990,000 on interest payments, Bramble said, the board is continuing to look for ways to cut costs. The board has made major staff cuts, eliminating more than 70 positions with hiring freezes and early retirement options beginning in 2005, she said.

Because 80 percent of the library's revenue comes from property taxes, the property tax caps have forced the board to reevaluate spending, Bramble said.

A law passed in 2008 capped residential property tax bills at 1.5 percent of a home's assessed value, with 2.5 percent limits on rental property and 3.5 percent caps on business property.

Beginning this year, those caps dropped to 1 percent, 2 percent and 3 percent of assessed value, respectively, giving libraries and other tax-funded entities even less to work with.

Call Star reporter Julie Crothers at (317) 444-2774

Library budgets, then and now

Operating fund changes from 2009 budget figures to the proposed 2010 budget, according to the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library's annual report, available on its Web site:

2009 -- 2010 -- Change +/-

Salaries -- \$16.5 million -- \$16.8 million -- +\$300,000

Fringe benefits -- \$6.6 million -- \$6.8 million -- +\$200,000

Supplies -- \$1 million -- \$500,000 -- -\$500,000

Other charges and services -- \$8.35 million -- \$8.3 million -- -\$40,000

Debt service -- \$3.7 million -- \$2.4 million -- -\$1.3 million

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Collection materials -- \$6.9 million -- \$5.2 million -- -\$1.7 million

Total \$43.2 million -- \$40 million -- -\$3.2 million

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