

Area libraries changing to keep up with the '90s

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STAFF WRITER

In an era of ossified, bureaucratic government that doesn't always adjust well to trends, Eccentric-area public libraries seem almost chameleon-like in their adaptability.

In Rochester, the response to a substantial demand for library services was to build a new \$10.2 million library three times as large as the old one. "The circulation the first week was 80 percent higher than normal," director Christine Hage said.

In Troy, the demand for business-related materials has been met to the extent that deputy director Linda Morrow said, "Business people are here all day, all during the day, all during the evening." And even on weekends they come. . . "They may have their jeans on, but they still have their briefcase," Morrow said.

'A cultural center'

In almost all libraries customers can reserve time on IBM and Apple computers and even rent videotapes. "It's a cultural center, really," Morrow said.

And in Birmingham, the library is held in such high esteem that it might well be called a temple. "Birmingham residents want a full-service library," said Martha Seaman, the deputy director of Baldwin Library. "They want what they would get in a much larger city."

Indeed, Baldwin's current budget has \$60 in it for every person in the library's service area (Birmingham, Bingham Farms and Beverly Hills). That figure, called a "per capita budget" is by

far the highest of Oakland County libraries.

But in a time of property tax freezes and millage-request assassinations, libraries are as vulnerable to economic vicissitudes as any school district or local government.

Survival then becomes, in part, a matter of public relations, Seaman said. "Libraries are now marketing themselves, whereas before they were just quiet. They were more passive. We can't take for granted that there will always be a library."

Such is the case with several big Oakland County libraries, including Baldwin, Bloomfield, Southfield, Farmington and Rochester. These libraries, along with those in Independence and Canton townships, are trying to get out of a book-sharing system called Wayne Oakland Library Federation because WOLF costs more money than they'd care to pay and charges them for services they don't need.

Southfield library director Doug Zyskowski said the high cost of WOLF is one of the reasons his spending on materials (like books and magazines) has decreased in each of the last four years. In the current fiscal year, Southfield will spend \$273,000 on materials out of a budget that tops \$2.7 million. As recently as 1990, the Southfield library bought \$429,000 worth of materials with a budget of \$2.4 million.

Book budget shrinks

"Until this point, our materials budget has shrunk and we don't want that to happen anymore," Zyskowski said. "That's one of the factors in our wanting to get out of WOLF."

West Bloomfield's two libraries are likewise hurting. Although the budget has risen for the last five years, as has spending on materials, the number of library visitors climbed from 287,000 in 1989 to 361,000 this year.

Like many libraries, West Bloomfield's runs on an annual assessment of less than one mill. The Headlee Amendment to the state constitution has reduced a .83 mill. Throw in the recent property tax freeze and rising costs and you've got a little problem.

"We're really trying to make (the money) stretch more," director Clara Bohrer said. "And an additional millage is not an alternative at this time."

Bohrer noted that a large part of her budget is accounted for by fixed-costs like payroll, insurance, utilities, etc. "When you start adding that together, there's very little discretionary money left," she said.

At the Rochester library, payroll takes 47.5 percent of the \$2.3 million budget. In contrast, book buying is only 7 percent of that budget.

By moving to a new building this year, the Rochester library is expecting a utility bill more than three times higher (\$162,000) than was paid in the old building.

In fact, of all Eccentric-area libraries, Rochester seems to be hurting most. Because voters rejected a one-mill increase for the library last August, director Hage must operate a building three times as large as the old one with a budget that exceeds its predecessor by just 10 percent.

"We have a budget that works, but it doesn't allow for the level of service we had last year in the old building," Hage said. "The reason the budget 'works' is that Hage has eliminated library programs, eliminated patron computer access, cut back on cleaning and closed the library on Sundays."

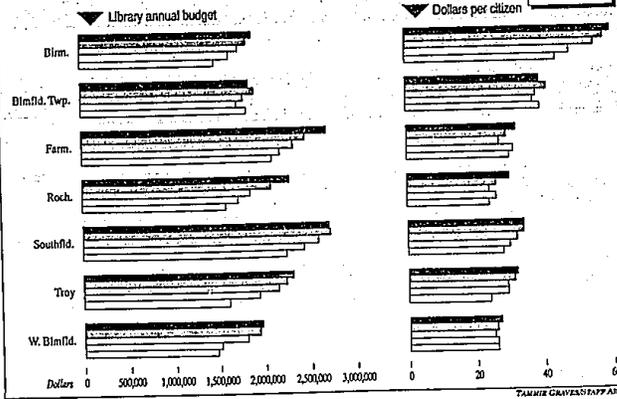
"Eventually we'll go back to the voters (for a millage increase)," Hage said.

Troy has a problem of its own, although library deputy director Morrow called it a "happy problem."

LIBRARY BUDGETS: ADAPTING TO THE '90s

The left side shows total annual budgets during the last five years for libraries in the Observer & Eccentric readership area. On the right is the number of dollars spent during the same time for each citizen within the library's service area.

Key:
 1992-93
 1991-92
 1990-91
 1989-90
 1988-89



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