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Camden preparing to close library system

By Matt Katz

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Camden is preparing to permanently shut its library system by the end of the year, potentially leaving residents of the impoverished city among the few in the United States unable to borrow a library book free.

At an emotional but sparsely attended meeting of the library board Thursday, its president, Martin McKernan, said the city's three libraries cannot stay open past Dec. 31 because of severe budget cuts by Mayor Dana L. Redd.

"It's extraordinary, it's appalling," McKernan said.

All materials in the libraries would be donated, auctioned, stored, or destroyed. That includes 187,000 books, historical documents, artifacts, and electronic equipment. Keeping materials in the shuttered buildings is a fire hazard, officials said, and would make them vulnerable to vandalism and vermin.

"They don't want to see our children grasp a future, but go down the toilet," said Jean Kehner, who described herself as a Camden resident for 76 years.

Redd is facing a \$28 million projected deficit stemming from reductions in state aid and a long-standing lack of taxable property. She is planning deep cuts in all departments, and she told McKernan last month that she would slash funding to the 105-year-old library system by about two-thirds.

Because not even one of the three libraries could stay open in 2011 on such limited support, all 21 employees would be laid off, McKernan said.

Redd left open the possibility that the libraries could be saved.

"The citizens are first, and the libraries are on the top of the list as we struggle through our budget," Redd said. "I was elected during challenging times to find solutions. I understand I may be a target

of a number of comments, but I have to construct the budget."

She said she was not responsible for the closings. "That is a decision of the library board."

There is little, if any, precedent to permanently closing an entire library system, experts said.

The American Library Association could only cite one other example, the Hood River County Library in Oregon, which closed its one location this summer. A measure on the ballot this fall would create a new model of funding and reopen the library.

"It's tragic," said Audra Caplan, president of the national Public Library Association. "We are the only institution in this country that provides access to information and materials for free, which is huge right now."

There is still hope for library users and employees. City Council must approve the mayor's fiscal year 2011 budget, which contains the reduced library funding. It will be introduced Tuesday. Library board member Frank Fulbrook has suggested that city officials lay off one police officer and one firefighter to save enough money to keep one branch open.

Discussions are also under way that would allow the Camden County library system to take over at least one branch.

But because the people of Camden voted on Nov. 4, 1903, to establish a library, another vote might be required to disband the library and join the county system. Victoria Rosch, New Jersey associate state librarian, said only voters can close a library. Otherwise, "the trustees by law have to take that money and somehow provide library service," she said.

In another indication of a possible lifeline, Redd said for the first time on Thursday that the city was legally required, in accordance with a state formula, to give the library nearly \$390,000 this year. Previously, she said only \$282,000 was available.

McKernan said he did know about that new figure, and July correspondence between him and the mayor confirmed that. Still, he said he did not know if the additional \$108,000 would be enough to keep even one branch open part-time.

In a city where less than a third of people have high-speed Internet service in their homes, according to the research group CamConnect, libraries allow people to go online, do schoolwork, and look for jobs. Closing the three branches would end the more than 150,000 annual visits - along with the daily chess games and children's book readings. During extreme weather, the facilities provide a respite for the homeless.

On Thursday at the main library in downtown Camden, Gabrielle Simmons, 21, applied for a job on the Internet while her 3-year-old son, Cameron, squirmed on her lap.

Simmons is an unemployed single mother who relies on the library to apply for jobs; many workplaces now only accept online applications. She was busy Thursday applying for a job at Old Navy in the Cherry Hill Mall.

Next to her sat Timothy Thomson, 32, who was laid off from Verizon last year. He comes to the library twice a week to check out self-help books and apply for jobs. Despite having a bachelor's

degree from Rutgers-Camden and recently completing culinary training at DeVry University, he said, he's still having trouble finding work. And now, he might lose his library.

"They sit there and say they're trying to make Camden better," he said. "They should find somewhere else to find funding because . . . you're closing off opportunity to people."

In a back room, children's librarian Robin Guenther presided over a reading with two dozen children. She said so far this summer, about 600 children have come in for story and crafts programs.

"Why isn't Camden worthy of a library? How can you tell Camden, one of the poorest cities in the country, that they don't deserve a library?" she asked.


Even closing the libraries would be a pricey proposition. The libraries contain historically valuable materials, including phone books dating to the 1880s and newspapers on microfilm from the 1870s. If the library board chooses to save the microfilm, it would cost as much as \$11,000 a year. And if the library cannot find a donor for all of its books, it is considering renting seven Dumpsters for \$6,230.

In 1904, Andrew Carnegie donated \$100,000 for the first library to be built in Camden. That sum might be enough to save the library more than a century later.

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