

We're trying to Meet Our Demand

By Karen Cernich, Features Editor | Posted: Wednesday, March 26, 2014 1:00 am

If you were looking for the Scenic Regional Library branch in New Haven and didn't notice the sign out front, you could easily drive right past it and never know.

The library looks nothing like a library, mainly because it was originally built as a church — in the 1880s, no less.

Inside, space is tight for a library, just 1,200 square feet, but the staff uses it as best they can. A corner with a brightly colored rug serves as the children's area for story time sessions held each Tuesday morning at 10 a.m., and it quickly becomes crowded, the librarian noted.

A table and four chairs near the back serve as a meeting area. More chairs can be brought over, but that blocks the back door and walkway to the rest room.

Scenic Regional Library Director Steve Campbell feels terrible when he thinks of patrons having to use the New Haven branch. The facility is in dire need of major improvements, he said, and it's the No. 1 priority should Franklin County voters approve a 10-cent tax levy increase proposed on the April 8 ballot.

The Scenic district, which includes seven branches in Franklin, Warren and Gasconade counties, has been operating at the same tax levy for 55 years, and it's stretched to the limit, said Campbell.

"It started with a 10-cent levy, which is the rate still used today," he noted.

A yes vote on the April ballot supports the issue, and means Scenic would be able to provide all of the things patrons asked for on a survey of 4,700 residents last April:

Nicer facilities, more new materials (books, e-books, CDs, DVDs . . .) and longer service hours (more evenings and weekend hours).

If passed, the increase will cost property owners an additional \$24.54 a year (per \$110,000 property). That's less than the price of a new hardcover book, Campbell likes to point out.

So far Scenic has the support of the Pacific Board of Aldermen and mayor, New Haven Lions Club, Washington Lions Club, Washington Library Board and St. Clair Mayor Ron Blum.

Missouri State Library Association recommends a library operate at a 20-cent or higher tax levy to be able to provide adequate service.

Neighboring libraries all operate at higher tax levies:

St. Louis County — 26 cents;

Jefferson County — 20 cents;

St. Charles City/County — 26 cents; and

Washington County — 20 cents.

Improved Facilities

If the tax levy increase is approved, Scenic has four priorities for using the funds.

“The No. 1 thing we would do is major renovations or expansions at all of the branches,” said Campbell, noting the work would be done over the course of several years.

“We have some horrible facilities,” Campbell remarked. “The New Haven branch is the worst . . . The foundation is crumbling. It’s not ADA compliant . . .”

Other facilities that are decent, like Pacific, are just too small for the population they serve.

“Pacific has the same population as Warrenton, but in Pacific we only have a 4,000-square-foot building, so it’s cramped and small,” said Campbell.

“We also rent three of our seven facilities, and we’re paying really high rent,” he noted. “Ideally, if we could . . . own our facilities, that would help us in the long term financially.”

New, More Materials

The increased funding also would be used to provide new materials. Currently the waiting lists for new books can be as long as three and four months, said Campbell.

“With this, we’d more than double our book budget, our materials budget,” he noted.

The Evergreen consortium that both Scenic and Washington libraries recently joined has boosted patrons access to more materials, but not new materials. One of the rules of the consortium is that new materials (anything owned less than one year) do not have to be part of the shared materials, Campbell explained.

More e-books would certainly be part of the plan, since more and more patrons are requesting them.

“Our e-book usage has gone up 35 percent each of the last two years, so what we’d like to be able to do is more than double our e-book budget,” said Campbell.

“Right now, patrons wanting e-books find that everything is almost always checked out. They have to put in a request to get any kind of e-book or audio book.”

A tax levy increase would allow Scenic to increase both the number and variety of materials.

“We have a holds ratio of seven to one, so for every seven requests we have for a book we’ll order one copy, but we’d like to be able to improve that ratio so it’s only three to one or two to one, so people can get the books a lot faster,” said Campbell.

“Washington residents can put holds on our books too, so they would also get the books a lot faster too.”

Also, a lot of libraries are offering downloadable magazines, and Scenic would like to be able to as well. Magazines could be downloaded from home for patrons to read on their tablets, and then when the due date arrives, the magazine disappears off of their device, just like ebooks do, said Campbell.

Another new feature other libraries are offering is downloadable or streaming videos, like movies on Netflix or songs.

“We don’t offer any of that, because that’s expensive technology right now,” said Campbell.

“So we feel like we’re starting to fall behind . . . because we don’t have the budget.”

More Service Hours

People who work full-time jobs during regular hours have a limited number of hours that Scenic libraries are open to them.

Most are only open late one night a week and have limited weekend hours.

The reason, said Campbell, is that the budget doesn’t allow to staff the libraries any more.

If the ballot measure is approved, that will change, said Campbell.

“We’d like to be able to open our branches in the evenings and on weekends more.”

More Outreach, Programming

If you haven't been into your local library or visited the Scenic website, you may not have known that every month each branch offers a variety of programs on topics like beekeeping, fly fishing, beginning yoga, self-defense, learning to crochet . . .

Some are informational, like one on how essential oils are used to treat physical ailments. Others are crafty, like how to make a pin cushion button jar (coming up at the New Haven branch Thursday, April 10).

One of the most popular programs was on trapping, said Campbell.

Programming is another area Scenic would like to be able to expand if the tax levy increase is approved.

"We would like to be able to offer not just more programming, but more specific programs catering to certain audiences — children, teens, seniors," said Campbell, noting he'd like to bring in more high-profile presenters.

Right now Scenic is doing a minimal amount of programming, but seeing a huge response from patrons. Last year, over 2,200 people attended 186 programs held at Scenic's seven branches.

"Even our small branches are still getting an average of 10, 15, 20 people per program," said Campbell. "Sometimes it's standing room only."

In addition to increased programming, Scenic would like to expand its outreach efforts, in other words, sending out staff to nursing homes, daycares, preschools, senior centers . . .

Last year, Scenic staff went to the Washington Senior Center to offer three e-book training sessions, one on the Kindle, Nook and iPad.

The staff also visits nursing homes, daycare centers and preschools to offer story time. Those are so popular that the library gets requests to do them weekly, said Campbell, when the best their budget allows is to offer them monthly.

"The biggest thing is we're trying to meet our demand," Campbell remarked.

"Libraries are doing these kinds of things because their job is to provide information to the public, no matter what format that is," he said. "Whether it's a DVD, CD or program, it's still information. You're learning something, which is what the library is really for."

Information Centers

With all that libraries offer patrons today, information centers may be a better name for them.

“We offer fax service. People can register to vote. Some libraries also offer health screenings and tax help,” said Campbell. “We can’t do that yet because of the size of our staff. It requires staff to manage those things.”

A budget increase, though, would allow Scenic branches to become more like community centers.

Despite the rise of the Internet, people used Scenic libraries more than ever before in 2013:

- Almost 500,000 items were checked out;
- Some 276,000 people visited Scenic’s seven branches;
- Almost 2,000 children participated in the Scenic summer reading program;
- Over 3,800 children attended Story Time;
- There were over 150,000 searches of Scenic’s research databases;
- People used Scenic’s Internet computers 50,000 times; and
- Over 40,000 people attended its children, teen and adult programs.

Washington Patrons Would Benefit Too

Washington residents may think the Scenic proposal doesn’t affect them, but it does, said Campbell.

For starters, 40 percent of Washington residents (anyone south of Highway 100 and west of Grand Avenue) actually live in Scenic’s district, he noted. That means they will be able to vote on the tax levy increase.

The Washington library’s area is the city’s boundary as it was in 1965.

Second, Washington library receives a lot of services from Scenic. The two libraries have a cooperative agreement, which means Scenic provides, among other things:

- Daily delivery service to Washington bringing materials from Scenic branches requested by Washington patrons.

- Access to all of Scenic's e-books and e-audio books since Washington library does not have any of its own.
- Free access to all of Scenic's databases — including Ancestry.com, Mango Languages (which is like Rosetta Stone), ChiltonLibrary of auto repair manuals and tutor.com, where students can work one-on-one with a tutor online for free for hours, if they need it.

“They can even upload their homework to the tutor so they can get help with it,” said Campbell.

Over 800 students use that service each year, and it's available to Washington students too.

“We give them a lot of these services in exchange for them serving our patrons,” said Campbell. “So we feel that people in Washington are going to benefit from this (tax increase) too. It's not just going to benefit Scenic Regional.

“We'll be able to offer the Washington library patrons a lot more too.”

The tax levy increase also would allow Scenic to provide more outreach to Washington residents, which it already does to some extent, such as the e-book training offered at Washington Senior Center.

Also children's librarian Christy Schink has visited Washington High School to speak about child development, Campbell noted, and the Scenic staff have visited Washington preschools and daycares.

“We'd like to be able to do more of that,” he said.

If You Don't Use the Library . . .

People who don't use the library at all should know that this tax levy increase will help them too, said Campbell.

“It helps home values, just like good schools and good parks,” he said. “People constantly call the library asking us what services we offer because they are thinking about buying a home in the area.

“People are constantly coming to the library to use the computers for things like working on their resume and searching job websites because they don't have home computers.”

People who are lucky enough to have access to things like a home computer or who can afford to purchase a brand new book whenever they want may forget that there are a lot of people in their community who can't, said Campbell. The library is for everyone.

"The library services benefit the kids in our communities, they grow up to be more productive members of society," he remarked. "It can help us all."

'Efficient User of Taxpayer Money'

Scenic Regional Library collects the third-lowest tax rate in the state of Missouri. It is 131 out of 133 libraries.

"Our library is considered a poor library," said Campbell. "If you talk to other libraries about Scenic, what they know is Scenic is poor. That's what we're known for."

He likes to say Scenic has been able to do more with less for decades, which makes it "a really efficient use of taxpayer money.

"If someone checks out just one hardcover book from one of our branches, that is basically what they've spent in taxes for the year, because an average book costs \$28," said Campbell.

"Now some people are paying more than that in taxes, but even two books, that's significant. No other government entity can say if you use our service one time, you've gotten your money back for an entire year."

As Campbell has been out visiting communities, giving presentations on the library's proposed tax levy increase, he's heard from conservative residents who say they don't like government, so he likes to point out to them that the library is funded 96 percent by local property tax.

"I always point out that (the government) doesn't control us," he said. "We don't get money from them, we are completely locally governed and locally funded. All of our board members are from your communities."

Thinking back to the '40s and '50s, when many libraries were formed, Campbell said they were basically just "rooms with books.

"There were card catalogs, people checked out books, and that was all the library offered.

"We're wanting a tax rate increase, because we're offering a lot more — outreach and computers and e-books, all these things they didn't have back then," he said.

“It costs a lot more money to run a library now.

“I think we provide a lot of good services for what we get, but we’re clearly not meeting the demand in terms of materials and other services,” said Campbell.

“We’re giving (patrons) an opportunity to get what they want.”

The tax levy increase needs a majority to pass, or 50 percent plus one vote, said Campbell. However, each county’s vote will be considered on its own, he said, meaning the issue could pass in one county, but fail in the others. In that case, the new revenue would only go to the county where it passed.