

Scenic director: Another virus shutdown unlikely

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HERMANN—It is the one patron comment that Scenic Regional Library District Executive Director Steve Campbell hopes to not hear again: “Of everything that is closed, I miss the library the most.”

That comment was included among the many scattered throughout the 2019-20 annual library district report that was delivered last week to the Gasconade County Commission.

“I would doubt if we ever shut down again like we did this spring,” Campbell told the commissioners.

The library system was shut down from

mid-March to June 1.

Campbell said the district is on track to begin remodeling of the former ALCO building into the newest Scenic branch next summer. “We hope to begin construction next summer and we’re told construction will take about eight months,” he said. That puts the grand opening of the branch in 2022, which is the 50th anniversary of the Hermann City Library joining the Scenic Regional system.

The library system chief said the new Hermann branch will be much improved from the current facility. “It will have all the amenities that all the other branches have, if not more,” he said.

Part of the building will be reworked to

provide about 1,000 square feet for a public art gallery, Campbell said.

In discussing the annual report, the executive director said the system has about 80 employees. “We’re in a kind of a hiring freeze right now,” he said. “We’ve had a few positions we haven’t filled.”

Aside from the shutdown, the coronavirus pandemic has forced the library, like other public agencies, to dip into their bank accounts in a substantial way to protect staff and patrons. He noted that the district has spent about \$13,000 on virus-related items. Scenic has been awarded about \$3,000 in CARES Act funds from Gasconade County, as well as receiving funding through the other counties it serves.

Visitors to the branches are met with employees wearing masks.

“We don’t require, but we encourage, the public to wear masks,” Campbell said. Plastic sneeze guards also protect workers at the branches’ check-out counters.

The annual report noted that during the shutdown programming continued on Facebook with 78 virtual storytimes and 22 virtual adult programs.

There are nine branches in the three counties — Gasconade, Franklin and Warren — that comprise Scenic Regional Library District. In the past fiscal year, July 2019 to June 2020, there were 315,267

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in-person visits, 199,690 visits online, and 21,329 community outreach visits made by library staff, the report said.

As for items checked out of the branches, there were 485,577 physical checkouts and 159,299 electronic circulation checkouts (e-books, e-magazines, e-videos and other digital products), an increase of 21.9 percent from last year’s level.

All nine branches now have staff trained to process passports. Last year, Scenic branches processed 410 passports, up 42.8 percent from a year earlier.

Computer use continues to be substantial at the branches. Also, patrons are making greater use of wireless availability on their own devices, according to the report. Computer use amounted to 49,680 instances and wireless use totaled 75,719, a 27.29-percent increase from a year earlier. Campbell noted that wireless connection is available from the library parking lot, as well

as inside the building.

District staff made 326 visits to daycare and school sites last year serving 17,973 youths.

The district’s youth programming continues to grow. Last year, 705 programs were offered reaching 25,039 children and teens, the report said.

Adult programming, which has seen a significant increase in participation in recent years, was dealt a setback by the coronavirus. After reaching 15,863 participants in 2018-19, the number of people taking part in adult programs last year fell to 13,704. The Adult Outreach Program also includes visits to nursing homes in the three counties. In the past year, there were 159 visits serving 3,198 senior citizens.

Scenic’s Summer Reading Program continues to be a popular offering. In the past year, 912 children, 215 teens and 723 adults participating in the Summer Reading Program. All participants logged a total of 518,630 minutes of reading.

The coronavirus also cost the district its Spring and Fall book sales this year. The Fall 2019 sales raised \$10,936, the second-largest amount generated by a sale. This year, the district shipped 29 pallets of boxes filled with books to a St. Louis distributor in lieu of having a sale, Campbell said. While the district receives money from such a move, it isn’t as much as it would make from a book sale, he said. “I’m hoping that in the spring we can have another sale,” Campbell said.

Scenic Regional Library District had projected revenues of \$5.746 million in the past year, along with projected expenditures of the same amount. The district is funded by a property tax of 20 cents per \$100 assessed valuation.

According to Campbell, the library is required by law to submit an annual report to the counties by Oct. 31. The full report can be found at <https://scenicregional.org/about-us/library-reports/annual-report/>.