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Rural Libraries: The Strength of Community

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Rural Libraries: The Strength of Community

Driving home last night, thinking about this *OLA Quarterly* issue on rural libraries, I heard an Oregon Public Broadcasting story on the Jackson County proposal to reopen the libraries before the end of 2007. An article in today's Mail Tribune indicates that among the recommendations is one to outsource the management to LSSI (Library Systems and Services LLC). The Jackson County Library system closure on April 6, 2007 shook me and I know many of us in the Oregon library community. It gained national attention as possibly one of the largest library shutdowns in U.S. history. That closure was one of the things that piqued my interest in putting together this issue. The closure and the failed Jackson County election levy for temporary funding in May point toward the need for sustainable funding and building community support.

One hundred and thirty-two Oregon public libraries deliver services to the estimated 839,000 Oregonians living in the rural areas of the state. Eighty-five percent of the libraries serve populations under 30,000. How to attract funding to deliver basic services to their communities, keep up with new technologies, support staff development, and maintain collections and buildings are daily challenges facing these libraries.

In this issue of *OLA Quarterly*, *Rural Libraries: The Strength of Community*, the authors discuss how they manage to survive and thrive in this current environment.

Valery King treats us with a photo essay of Oregon rural libraries, from

the historic and quaint to the new and spacious. Photographed and captioned by the people who work in them, these images show the variety of spaces that Oregonians envision when they think "library." They are the kinds of places where many of us who have gone on to join the profession first discovered our love of libraries, and where dedicated people continue to strive to provide that experience to Oregonians of all ages, regardless of the size of their community.

Building community refers as well to library-to-library interactions. Jim Schepke, the State Librarian, provides us with a history about two strong, resourceful women who set the foundation for our present library systems. As early as 1905, Mary Frances Isom and Cornelia Marvin understood the benefits of providing centralized services. Then Mary Rounds describes what it means to be a branch library in the Corvallis Benton County Public library system. Through the services they provide, Alsea is able to better meet the needs of its citizens.

Jolyn Wynn and Sandra Crittenden provide practical advice on establishing and sustaining an important local collection. Their Harney County Claire McGill Luce Western History Room represents only some of the special collection gems tucked away in rural libraries.

Technology support issues can be especially challenging in rural settings. Wayne Guidry details how to make technology administration sustainable in multiple libraries with little technical support.

Articles from Alsea and Estacada discuss how these libraries relied on community support to build new buildings. In Cornelius, strong supporters and the library consortia staved off the closure of the library. These stories demonstrate how communities can rally to support an institution that means so much to them. They also celebrate the commitment of volunteers and donors in making their communities' dreams come true. But as Alsea realized, just as Jackson County did, after the building is finished the need to identify sustainable funding for ongoing maintenance and service is critical.

I don't know which option Jackson County will pursue to bring back library service, but I do know that having some service is important to their community and to Oregon's future. Mary Rounds' statement perhaps says it best: "A local library is a place that encourages community identity and awareness, catalyzes local action, and can be a forum for ideas promoting self-sufficiency and sustainability both for individuals and for the village."

We hope you enjoy the issue.

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