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## Rebirth and Renewal: How a Year of Closure Benefited Hood River County's Libraries

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# Rebirth and Renewal:

## How a Year of Closure Benefited Hood River County's Libraries

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The adage that misfortunes come in threes was unfortunately the case when it came to library closures in Oregon. Three county-run libraries closed and subsequently reopened, each under different governance models: Jackson County Library Services in 2007, Josephine County Library in 2007, and Hood River County Library in 2010. When the last of those libraries, Hood River County, reopened, it was perhaps the most watched management change among Oregon libraries in several years. This attention came because the Hood River County Library District, the phoenix that arose from the ashes of the county-run library, is the first of the three to reopen with permanent, stable funding.

Hood River County Library's closure and subsequent reopening created an invaluable opportunity to re-envision it in light of what the community wanted, an opportunity of which I find myself fortunate to be part. The library's rebirth is filled with many amazing leaders—dedicated library board members, staff, Friends, Foundation, and volunteers. These leaders who spearheaded the library's reopening had a new vision that required difficult choices, choices that ultimately placed the library on a path to a better future.

### Saying no before saying yes

Hood River County was hit hard by declining revenues from sale of timber from County-owned forestland. This loss, combined with mounting Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) costs and a flagging economy, forced the County Commissioners to make tough choices. One of those choices was to de-fund the library. The Commissioners placed a measure on the ballot in May 2010, to create a special library district, funded at \$0.70 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. Despite valiant efforts, the measure failed. On July 1, 2010, the doors of the three County libraries—in Hood River, Cascade Locks, and Parkdale—were shuttered.

The failure of the measure shocked many. The measure, with its \$0.70 tax rate, was designed to provide ample library services and hours. As library staff and supporters, we might wonder, how could a community not want a good library? The closure forced many in Hood River County and around the state to realize that, while those who use them fervently support libraries, they may mean little to large portions of their service populations. In Hood River County, the library measure proved too expensive. No library wants to face that reality.

At this point, some people may have given up. The community had spoken, and it did not want libraries. However, that reality allowed a new group of leaders to ask, what is a library that the entire community can support? What needs to change? What needs to stay the same? This new group of leaders included not just activists from the previous campaign and members of the library's Friends and Foundation, but also new individuals who perhaps never thought of themselves as library supporters. These people were horrified at the thought of living in towns with no libraries.





Ad for Save Our Libraries.

They rallied together to place another measure on the ballot in November, 2010, and made the difficult but necessary decision to ask for less funding, \$0.39 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The measure passed by a thin margin, 53 to 47 percent. There were many amazing individuals responsible for helping pass the new district. However, with the passage of the measure came five new “official” leaders of the library: Paul Blackburn, Mary-Ethel Foley, Mike Oates, Sara Duckwall Snyder, and Heather Staten, the infant district’s independent governing board.

**Debt: Not the way to start a library**

With no staff and the need to reopen three libraries under new governance, the new Board and many volunteers had to undertake another monumental task right on the heels of the difficult campaign. They had an unusual opportunity to learn the nuances of how to run a library. While many of the volunteers had worked in particular aspects of library operations, and one Board member was a retired special librarian, nobody had a complete understanding of what it took to run a public library system. Reopening one would mean a steep learning curve.

Thanks to a Library Services and Technology Act grant from the Oregon State Library, the new Board was able to hire consultant Michael Gaston to advise on reopening the libraries. Gaston directed the Deschutes Public Library when it changed from being a county department to a special district. Gaston’s assistance paved the way for critical decisions such as establishing financial procedures, delineating board governance, and hiring a director.

However, one of the Board’s first major decisions was to reject one of Gaston’s recommendations, a suggestion to go into debt. In order to reopen the libraries in July 2011, money would be needed before tax revenues would be received in November. The simplest way to get these funds would be Tax Anticipatory Notes, in which the new district would borrow against its future tax revenue. Instead, library supporters decided to raise the funds for “early opening” from grants and private donations.



Once again, this decision required fortitude and a certain degree of audacity: raising this money would require asking a community that had approved the library only narrowly to reach into its pockets and give more. The community once again stepped up; it raised over \$215,000 to support library operations from July to November, 2011, thanks to support from the Meyer Memorial Trust, Miller Foundation, Oregon Community Foundation, Wichita Falls Area Community Foundation, unspent funds from the Ready to Read grant program, and over \$110,000 donated by private individuals.

### **But who will change the light bulbs?**

The campaign and fundraising efforts highlighted the advantages that district libraries have over their municipal counterparts. Hood River County Library District no longer has to compete with other departments for limited funds. County commissioners and city councilors are faced with the unenviable job of distributing limited funds among many worthy needs: roads, public safety, courts, emergency response, etc. By passing a library district, the citizens of Hood River County devoted funding exclusively for libraries.

The library district also now had a governing board completely dedicated to it. Just as their funds must be distributed, so too must be the attention of county commissioners and city councilors. A special district board is able to focus singularly on the library, allowing members to better understand its operations. This focus also benefits library users: if they are displeased with the Board, they can elect—or even become—new board members.

However, the planning process for the new district also highlighted disadvantages. The library itself would now become responsible for tasks previously done by other County departments: finance, human resources, information technology, intergovernmental relations, maintenance, and more. Who owns and would maintain the beautiful Carnegie building in Hood River, including its nearly two-acre park? How would staff computer and phone networks work, given their inextricable link with the County's? How would items be delivered among branches when the library previously relied on a County-owned vehicle? All of these issues needed clarification before the libraries could reopen.

The Board also found itself getting a crash course in library district management. Within a few months, members learned about public meeting law, contracting, insurance, budgeting, financial procedures, intergovernmental agreements, and more. They had to learn these fundamental governance skills along with teaching themselves about library operations; the Board had to act as the governing board and the library director simultaneously. Among the most momentous of the decisions was selecting a library consortium, choosing for models among Fort Vancouver Regional Library System, Libraries in Clackamas County (LINCC), or the Sage Library System of Eastern Oregon. The decision would affect dramatically the library's patrons and future staff. Due to its low costs, open source mindset, and connection to Hood River's previous consortium, GorgeLINK, Hood River County Library District is now part of Sage.

### **New library, now featuring actual staff!**

The Board and volunteers planned and raised funds with no staff until they hired a director in June, 2011. They considered this one of the most important decisions they would make, and I am still thankful and amazed that they chose me. Now I was to become a part of this incredible story.



The open opportunity in Hood River County is what attracted me to the position: how often do you have the chance to start a library anew and re-envision what it can do for its community? While the opportunity was monumental, so too was the challenge. I was responsible for reopening three libraries within a month. We had no staff, a skeletal budget, bare bones policies, and only basic administrative systems. What we did have were passionate, hardworking people on the Board, Friends, and Foundation.

I am extremely grateful to these dedicated, knowledgeable people because I most certainly was not prepared for this job, although the Board thought otherwise. How can you prepare for such a position, really? Most librarians are fortunate enough, despite the opportunity it provides, to not have to reopen a library system after a year of closure. I only had four years of library management experience, a year and a half as director of the Langlois Public Library and two and half years as assistant director of the North Bend Public Library.

Despite my lack of preparation, I have found myself continually thankful in these last nine months, not for my library degree but rather for my degree in public policy/administration. Reopening a library under a new governance structure has required writing policies, hiring personnel, establishing intergovernmental agreements, selecting contractors and vendors, and much else. The coursework and practica I took in public policy helped me navigate these processes. Just as the Board of Directors in a library district can be *more focused* on library governance, the director of such a district is *less focused* on library-specific duties because s/he acquires many administrative responsibilities: human resources, finance, etc. The combination of library and public administration training allowed me to tackle this variety of duties.

Like the Board's decision on hiring a director, I knew that my most important decision would be hiring staff. As has happened often in these past few months, I was placed in an enviable position of being able to ask and answer very fundamental questions: if you could hire your library staff completely anew, whom would you hire? What would their responsibilities be?

This openness had its difficulties. The previous library had employed nearly twenty highly qualified staff. What was the new district's responsibility to those former employees? Ultimately, I chose not to prefer previous staff over other applicants. As an outsider, having never worked at the previous library nor even visited the Columbia Gorge before accepting the position, this decision was likely easier for me. I considered previous library experience and sought three main qualities: a patron-focused attitude, excitement about starting a library anew, and eagerness for new ideas. Staff would need to be jacks-of-all-trades, for in the early months, everyone would need to do a bit of everything. And we would all have to do so while learning a new integrated library system on the fly.

We are now a small but mighty twelve-person staff. Although not by design, our staff in some sense represents the new start that the Board sought: we are a mix of old and new, experienced and inexperienced. Half of us worked for the previous county-run library. Many of us are Gen Xers or Millennials. For the first time in Hood River County Library history, we have staff specifically devoted to cataloging, technology instruction, and outreach to the Latino population that comprises a third of our county. The staff's diversity and opportunity to start fresh allows us to take what people loved about the previous library and integrate new ideas to make it better.





New hours.

### **A new beginning**

As of February 2012, our libraries are going strong. The Hood River Library is open forty-three hours per week, while the Cascade Locks and Parkdale Libraries are, at twenty per week, open more hours than they have ever been before. We have a full complement of library services, collections, and programming, and are expanding them continually. We are going out into the community to spread the word about what the library has to offer. And, most importantly, the public is using us, with our statistics on track to return to pre-closure levels by the end of the year.

But we still have much to do. We still need to reach out to that 47 percent of the population who did not vote for the library district. Recently, our Board established strategic goals for the next four years. Among the most important of these is getting staff out of the literal and figurative brick-and-mortar of the library and into the community. We need to let people know what a twenty-first century library has to offer.

Our work continues. Every month, the Board, staff, volunteers, and I find ourselves writing new policies, creating new procedures, brainstorming new ideas, and doing many other tasks associated with reopening. And while these never-ending responsibilities seem daunting, they also reveal the true silver lining of the closure of the Hood River County Library: an opportunity to reassess what a library can and should mean to its community. Often we find ourselves so caught up in maintaining our libraries that we fail to pause to ask ourselves whether what we are doing is what is best for our entire community. In Hood River County, we were forced to pause and reconsider, and that reconsideration allows us to create libraries that truly reflect our diverse community. 🌿

