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# Douglas County's 'Long and Winding Road'

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HAROLD A. HAYES

How does a reluctant reader become a library director one might ask? Well, start with a mother who read to her children extensively—including that reluctant reader—as well as frequent trips to the public library. Add to the mix a teacher who made his students read and do book reports. Then down the line marry off that reluctant reader to a librarian and later still find the first career path eliminated by technology. To this add a return to school and the acquiring of an MLIS. Pile on 17 years of professional and management experience and an application and voila, you have a library director!

My professional career has taken me from the award of that MLIS at the University of Washington to Wyoming and back to Washington, where I worked for two different library districts, always working with small rural branches. I have had the privilege of working as the director of the Douglas County Library System since the beginning of 2013, which has also afforded me the opportunity to live in Oregon again since leaving to attend college back in 1979. Roseburg, with a population of 22,000, is the county seat and the location of our main library. It's as big as it gets here. Our 10 branches are located in rural communities throughout the county.

*For an impoverished child whose family could not afford to buy books, the library was the open door to wonder and achievement, and I can never be sufficiently grateful that I had the wit to charge through that door and make the most of it. Now, when I read constantly about the way in which library funds are being cut and cut, I can only think that the door is closing and that American society has found one more way to destroy itself.*

—ISAAC ASIMOV



Public Libraries have a long history in Douglas County. Myrtle Creek established a library in 1912. Roseburg's library roots began with the Roseburg Woman's Club in 1920; Reedsport service began that same year. Glendale's library dates back to 1930, and Oakland started their library in 1932. Also in 1932, a books-by-mail service was started in Drain, with the

books coming from the OSU library. The Yoncalla Study Club started a library in 1933. In 1935 Sutherlin started their library, housed in the city hall. Canyonville was a late bloomer with their public library opening in 1951.

The Douglas County Library System (DCLS) formed in 1953 with the main library located in the courthouse in Roseburg, eight branches located in the several small communities, and a bookmobile. The benefits included the economy of scale, access to a wider collection, and shared functions with greater internal support. Today the DCLS includes the main library in Roseburg, completed in 1994, and 10 branches located throughout the county. Winston and Riddle got their libraries after the system was formed, in 1964 and 1966 respectively.

In a county that has historically relied on timber sale taxes, budget reductions began as early as 1982. This became a frequent if not an annual occurrence over the years since. Next year will be our capstone. Our budget direction given to the library system for the fiscal year 2016/17 was to cut \$495,000 dollars from last year's budget, a 42 percent reduction. This decades long and winding road has led us to a fork in the road with the future of the library up in the air. Rest assured, we have not been sitting around waiting and hoping!

As is typical for libraries throughout the state and nation, we actively pursue a variety of grant opportunities at the DCLS. Last November the DCLS was awarded grants of \$300,000 from The Ford Family Foundation and several individual grants under the umbrella of the Oregon Community Foundation totaling \$200,000 to support operating costs for the library system for calendar year 2016. In a real world where grants are typically geared towards specific projects, narrowly defined, these grants were aimed at keeping the library system's staff and services at current levels until voters go to the polls to weigh in on a library taxing district in November 2016; a "bridge to the ballot." In conversations with MaryKay Dahlgreen, State Librarian, she was convinced that these grants, supporting operations, were unprecedented. Certainly they were an incredible demonstration of support for the library system specifically, but also a demonstration of support for the residents of Douglas County.

A Political Action Committee (PAC) was formed to support a county initiative in the form of a ballot measure, which would establish a library taxing district to replace the declining funds from the county's budget. This is the mechanism by which the political process is accomplished. We have a fabulous group of people who came together in support of the library and the citizens of the county. It is a huge undertaking which has required hundreds of hours of donated time to date, with another five months still to go. Their website is: <http://www.saveourlibraries.org>

These folks at the PAC work directly with a group called EveryLibrary which supports library campaigns nationwide. They have helped with education and support as well as a small donation. The following statement is from their website (<http://everylibrary.org>):

EveryLibrary is the first and only national organization dedicated exclusively to political action at a local level to create, renew, and protect public funding for libraries of all types. We are a nonprofit Political Action Committee chartered to work exclusively on local library ballot initiatives.

Legally and according to Oregon State Statutes, the DCLS and library staff can play no direct part in advocating for the passage of a library district. This does not mean that there is no role for our library staff and volunteers in this process. We will continue to promote the library's role in the community; highlight our programs and services; and extol the benefits



## **Proposal to Create a “Douglas County Library District” Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Why do we need a new “Library District”?**

The amount of money that Douglas County gets every year from property taxes is not enough to pay for the Sheriff’s Department, let alone the parks, the fairgrounds, the museum, and our libraries. The County used to receive significantly more money from federal timber harvests, but those harvests have been reduced over the last few decades. Currently, the County Board of Commissioners is unable to continue to fund the Douglas County Library System (DCLS) into the future. Creating a special taxing district dedicated exclusively to libraries would make the library system independent, give us a sustainable source of funding, and keep our libraries open

### **How much will it cost?**

Forty-four cents per thousand dollars of assessed property value: \$0.44/\$1,000. That means the owner of a Douglas County home assessed at \$150,000 would pay \$66 a year... around \$5.50 per month.

### **How much do Douglas County residents pay in taxes for the library?**

Nothing... and we never have.

### **What happens if we don’t create a new Library District?**

DCLS will shut down in July of 2017 because Douglas County will no longer be able to fund our library operations.

### **How many libraries are we talking about?**

Ten: Roseburg, Canyonville, Drain, Glendale, Myrtle Creek, Oakland, Reedsport, Riddle, Winston, Yoncalla

### **Why can’t we run our libraries with volunteers?**

DCLS already relies heavily on volunteers; currently, 150 volunteers provide 20% of the work. Volunteers are unable to provide the same level of service that our professional staff is able to provide. The feasibility of managing 750 volunteers at 10 locations would not be reasonable.

### **Why don’t we just charge for library cards?**

In Oregon, public libraries are not permitted to charge a fee for library services. Charging for library cards and library services goes against the very meaning of a “public library.” We don’t charge people to go to “public schools” either.

### **Do people even use libraries anymore?**

YES! In 2015, we checked out more than half a million items. In addition to books, our libraries provided programming for all ages including preschool storytime for early literacy development, summer reading programs, and book clubs. We also offer public computer access, internet access, streaming eBooks and audiobooks, DVDs and CDs, magazines, meeting spaces for our citizens and their activities, as well as professional staff to help people access the information they need.

### **Why a County-wide library system?**

DCLS partners with cities throughout Douglas County to provide library service. By operating together, we provide shared savings while increasing services to our patrons. For instance, residents in each branch have access to all 350,000 books and additional materials in our library system, and not just the limited items available at their nearest location.

From the Save Our Libraries PAC. See: <http://saveourlibraries.org/>



the DCLS brings to the county, each community, and to every individual who resides in Douglas County. Ultimately it's a grass roots movement. There is a role for everyone; PAC member, library staff, library volunteer, and concerned citizen.

So, there is a challenge before our citizens and a decision to make. The choice of direction for the library system in Douglas County will ultimately be decided by the voters. Here are a few facets of that challenge: there are those who will vote against any new tax or tax increase, there are those who think that in this age of electronic devices a public library is not needed, there are those who say that in a poor county taxing for a library makes our citizens poorer, and there are those who will say that funding libraries will take money away from our law enforcement, fire districts, roads, etc. The answer to the dilemma of educating our voters and correcting the public's misconceptions relating to library service is two-pronged — the PAC will address those issues (and many others) relating to promoting the library taxing district from the political side, including the effort to get out the vote and vote 'YES' — the DCLS staff and volunteers will continue and increase efforts to promote and explain the benefits of a public library.

So, the lessons learned so far:

- Expect the unexpected
- Don't assume anything
- Question everything and everyone
- Leave no stone unturned
- Network—talk to everyone
- Don't be afraid to ask

And a guess:

- Pace yourself so there is something left for the final sprint to the finish line

We at the DCLS are not alone in Oregon. Libraries throughout the state have literally faced decades of funding and other related challenges. We have tried to learn from and incorporate the lessons from other libraries in the state that have faced budget crises. Unsolicited help will not be turned down! So, our long and winding road leads to the door of every citizen of Douglas County. There is lots of work ahead as we check off each day and as we approach that fateful day of November 8. (A new President to elect, you say? Well, yes, there is that too.) 🐾



Douglas County Library in Roseburg Oregon.

