

Maryland library cuts: Essential service hurt

Judy Neri

The Sun (1837-1985); Sep 6, 1981; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Baltimore Sun (1837-1985)

pg. K2

By Judy Neri

As George Ticknor stood at the circulation desk of Long Branch Library in Silver Spring taking out a stack of books half a yard high, he said, "You know, if you had to go out and buy all these books, it would cost you a mint. When you come to think about it, this library service is a pretty good deal."

George Ticknor should know whereof he speaks, not only because he is one of Montgomery county's avid readers and a writer of stories but also because he is a descendant of the George Ticknor, Harvard professor, who was sent to Europe back around 1830 to buy books for the Boston Library.

He not only bought the books but also came up with a number of revolutionary ideas about how to use them. For example, old George is credited with asking, "Why should people have to sit around in a dusty old library to read their books? Why not let them take the books home?"

He also asked, "Why should children have to know how to read before going to school?" And again, "Shouldn't people be able to read fiction as well as textbooks?"

Although George Ticknor's ancestor was considered revolutionary in his own time, posterity has thumbed an "I told you so" at the judgment of his peers. Few educated people today could live anywhere for very long without taking out that little library card.

This is especially true in the Baltimore-Washington area, where Robert Alvarez, editor of the California-based *Administrator's Digest*, noticed that the public library systems are more innovative, more competitive and have more "one-million circulators" than anywhere else in the world.

This area includes Baltimore's Enoch Pratt system and the Howard, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Prince Georges and Montgomery county systems in Maryland, plus the Fairfax and Arlington county systems in Virginia. In this urban-suburban corridor, people seem to read more intently and more continuously than almost anywhere else and are quite dependent upon their local libraries for informational as well as recreational reading.

These library users, however, are in for a big disappointment starting now—unless library funding takes a turn for the better.

As Anna Curry, the new director of the Enoch Pratt Free Library system, remarks, "The problem is first of all, a fiscal one and not limited to libraries. All city agencies are facing service reductions. But this will be an extremely difficult year for us at Pratt. We will have to take many losses just to cover our portion of citywide mandated salary increases."

"All our libraries except the central one will be closing one month of the year. Fort Worthington Library will be closed down altogether, and we will have to terminate our Urban Services Library Reading Program and close six reading rooms."

Mrs. Curry says she will also lose 50 CETA jobs because of federal cutbacks and all her positions will be subject to loss by attrition.

According to Nettie Taylor, head of the Library Division of the State Board of Higher Education, "The most serious problem affecting libraries is that their funding is, in real terms, either decreasing or remaining the same, while the demand for services increases. And the cost of materials keeps rising above the general inflation rate."

Nettie Taylor's division is responsible for leadership and statewide planning and coordination of library service. It administers federal funds to local jurisdictions and establishes guidelines for service.

The division also administers the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), Title I, as well as the State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, and a computerized educational library which gives access to data bases and provides information to school systems around the state.

They, too, are feeling the pinch, for the governor has asked for a 3 percent reduction in their budget for the second year in a row. Officials do not know, for themselves or for the systems they assist, what the future will bring, but they are very uneasy about the Reagan administration's proposal to make block grants to the states.

"The overall amount will be diminished," says Nettie Taylor, "and everyone is uncertain how the smaller pie will be cut."

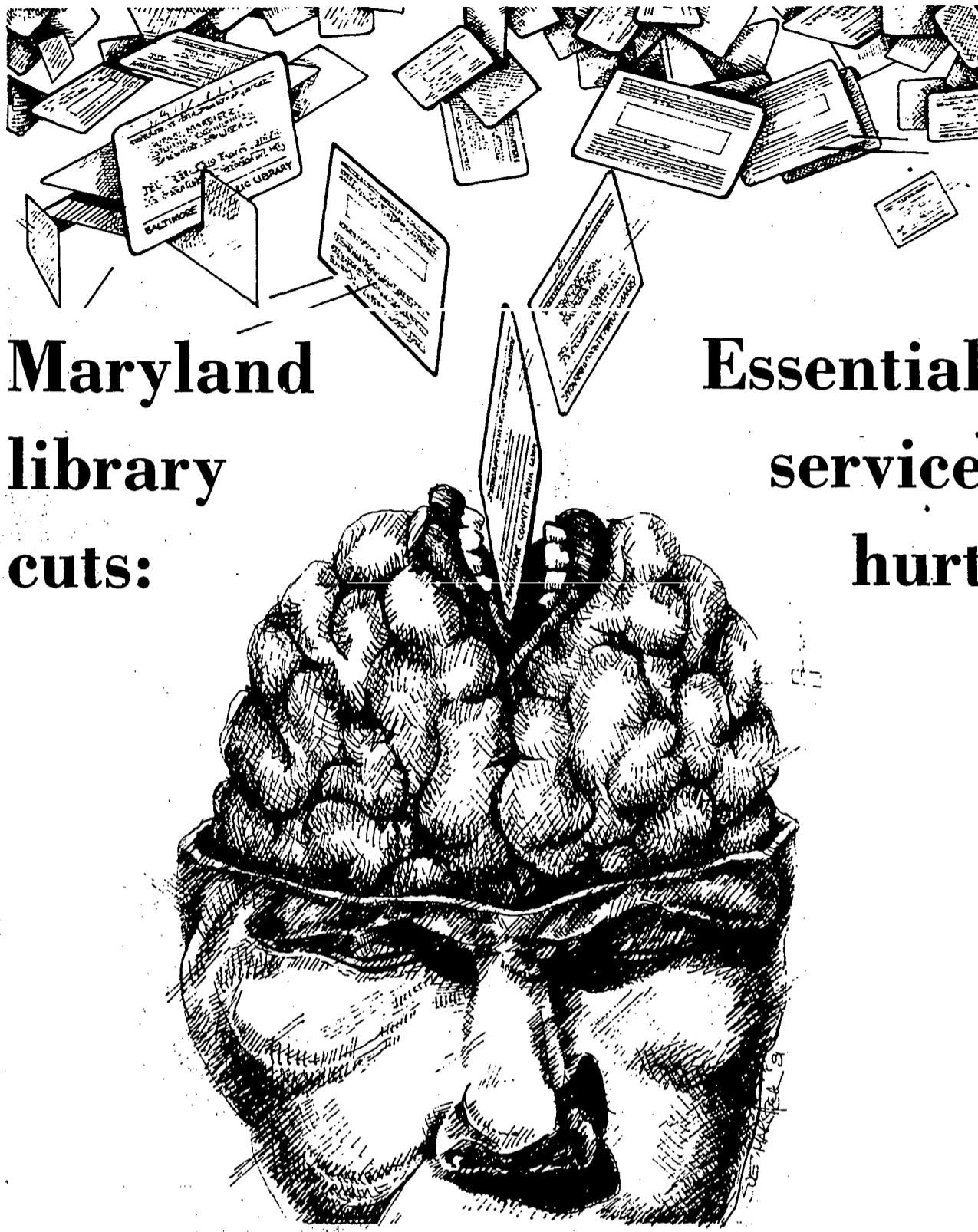
Part of the problem in Maryland libraries lies in the fact that the state contribution has not been raised in years. State aid to public libraries is based on a complicated formula which relates the wealth and population of a county (or Baltimore city) in providing a funding figure. The formula aims to insure at least \$5 per capita in each jurisdiction. Poor counties get more from the state, rich counties less.

Robert Neal, administrator of the Allegany county system, and Mary McNally, head of the Dorchester system, would like to see the funding formula raised to the \$8 per capita recommended in 1979 by the Governor's Conference on Libraries.

In 1980 a bill passed the legislature which raised the formula to \$6.50, but even that small increase was vetoed by Governor Hughes, who pleaded lack of funds.

Delegate Lucille Maurer, head of the Scanlon Task Force on State-Local Fiscal Relationships, said the task force recommended that no library system get diminished aid as a result of changing the wealth definition in the funding formula. But

Ms. Neri is a member of the Montgomery County Ad Hoc Citizens Planning Committee for Public Libraries.



Maryland library cuts:

Essential service hurt

she doubts that the formula of \$5 per capita can be increased next year.

"The state faces the unprecedented problem of absorbing over \$200 million in cuts from the federal government," she said. "And given the condition of the economy, there will be great uncertainty about the revenue picture."

Thus, the bill is thrown back to the counties. As Nettie Taylor surveys the situation statewide, she notes that counties have held down staff costs simply by giving low cost-of-living increases—in some cases none at all. Often library staff increases are lower than those given to school system employees. This is true even though public library service is considered by state law to be "an essential component of the educational system." (Sec. 23-101, Ann. Code.)

Even more threatening to public libraries is that many counties have not given and are not giving significant funding above the minimum required to obtain state funds. Ironically, these counties are usually the poorest ones, which need most the free educational and information services public libraries provide.

Marjorie Reith, assistant director of Carroll County Public Libraries, comments, "In any economic downturn or period when costs for individuals rise, library use increases, but support of libraries does not. Today libraries are more visible, face greater demands and their public is more educated and needs or seeks more self-education. But libraries need more support to meet these demands."

The situation in Carroll county is a case in point. Since the new central library opened a year ago, demand for library service has increased 40 percent, but the staff has remained the same. Says Ms. Reith, "They are suffering under the strain."

In Kent county, too, library use is growing. The move into a new building brought a 50 percent increase in circulation. There, too, people don't only take out books; they seek much more reference help and in-house use of the library than ever.

Director Claudia Sumler doesn't have enough employees to handle the demand. The library will close for a week around Christmas in order to meet the dictates of the county commissioners that library operating expenses be cut to the level of last

year's budget minus 5 percent. She worries that "rural counties with small populations like ours, which do not have an expanding tax base, face great problems in the future."

In Dorchester county, belt-tightening is even more dramatic. The county has given the library system the same budget as last year. In Cecil, the county has appropriated the bare minimum necessary to get state funding. The same is true in Somerset, Allegany, Frederick and Garrett counties, where overall per capita support hovers in the \$5 to \$6 range.

But the prize for most disastrous goes to Somerset county, where the county commissioners have refused to continue federal grants and are asking the library system to run on 61 percent of last year's budget.

Director Linda Hauck has been studying her system and doing outreach into the community in order to improve service and the public image of the library. But she finds it an uphill battle in a county which has decided this year to give 0.69 percent of its overall budget to libraries, 0.37 percent to social services and 0.58 percent to economic development. The dreariness that lies in a decimal point!

It is a sad truth of public life that libraries have never been well funded and that librarians could easily write the authoritative edition of a Penny-Pincher's Manual, so constantly must they exercise the art.

The director of the Garrett county system, for example, is doing everything she can to keep up service without cutting staff on a no-increase budget. Mrs. Edith Brock has turned down the air-conditioner, dropped some clerical help, cut back on periodicals and some reference service, cut back on the increased summer help her resort community needs and even dropped the maintenance contract on her branch copier.

What next? Mrs. Brock's long-term ulcer comes from the fact that Garrett county's one bookmobile is very old and on the road all the time, and she does not know how she is going to replace it.

Mr. Neal of Allegany county found another trick to deal with tight funding in a depressed county with a low tax base. He didn't order any new books for the last month of fiscal 1981 so he could pur-

chase in FY 1982 the same number of titles as in FY 1981. (In case you hadn't guessed, this trick comes from the chapter entitled "Borrowing from Peter to Pay Paul.")

Martha Reynolds, director of Frederick County Public Libraries, whose Visual Cooperative with Carroll county is a raving success, has had to close her central library on Thursdays. She also faces the prospect of not having enough staff for the new central library which is scheduled to open this year, a replacement for the current very small library.

Like richer systems, she will cut back hours. "We have done everything we can do without dollars," she says, "and now we are in a state of crisis in funding."

Like Arthur Goetz, who heads the Wicomico county system, she feels it is a matter of public perceptions. "When citizens realize the services libraries can provide," Martha Reynolds says, "they will be more adequately funded."

Other administrators agree. William Robert Gordon, director of the Prince Georges system, noted the common public misconception that libraries are for recreational use only. "When people come to the library, they are typically surprised at the extent and depth of service available," he said.

Agnes Griffen, the new director in Montgomery county and currently president of the Public Library Association, put it another way.

"People think that all you need to run a library is to open the doors and let the folks grab the books," he said. "Instead, very complex procedures take place, some of which include analysis of patron needs, selecting materials, preparing them for circulation, developing reference collections systemwide, developing programs and special services, such as those for business, for children or for the homebound."

"The problem we face in funding lies in communicating the complexity of what librarians do, most of which happens behind the scenes."

Not all library directors see a crisis in funding because some work in counties whose elected officials are more responsive to the needs of libraries. In Baltimore county, for example, a county whose circulation is the highest in the nation, Associate Director Jean-Barry Molz says the county execu-

tive and the County Council have been supportive. "They understand," she says, "that the libraries touch more people on a voluntary basis than any other institution."

But even the richer systems face problems. Baltimore county has had to do away with specialist librarians. Prince Georges libraries, in the only Maryland county to have passed a tax referendum, have had to cut 90 positions while adding two branches and a few services.

It was done, says Mr. Gordon, by planning and using attrition. He adds, with discernible pride, "the largest category of persons eliminated were administrative, and the category of expense which has most increased is the materials budget."

Even Howard county feels the pinch, though the library has been receiving 18 and 20 percent increases as it builds the superstructure to serve a county whose population has increased 86 percent in the last decade. The population is middle-class, well educated and highly mobile, and demands a high level of library service. Sixty percent of the population have library cards.

Howard's new central library has been open for just six months in the Town Center opposite Merriweather Post Pavilion. "Our worst problem," muses Director Marvin Thomas, "is inflation. It simply eats up our increases." So the system, like others, has had to absorb cuts in the work force.

Mr. Gordon is hopeful that the suburban libraries, "by planning ahead and by approaching problems energetically and creatively, will survive and still be able to provide good service." His qualified optimism derives, one surmises, from the fact that even when severely cut, the suburban libraries start from a higher level of per capita support.

But he is not so optimistic about large Eastern city libraries like Enoch Pratt. "They are truly at a point of crisis," he says. And Nettie Taylor points out that for many rural systems the situation is also critical.

Of course, the state of Maryland is not alone in facing budget strictures. Libraries, like all public institutions today, go into the future in a disadvantaged position, for they are regularly identified as easy targets for budget cuts since their constituencies lack organization and high-paid lobbyists.

Public officials seem to succumb all too easily to the budget schizophrenia of building facilities with little thought to how they will staff and provide materials for them. Thus, libraries are among the first victims of the current fad of cost-analysis-without-criteria.

Statistics, ultimately, are only a symptom—in this case, a symptom of ignorance on the part of public officialdom of a modern public library's role and function.

Both have developed far beyond the first George Ticknor's wildest imaginings. As an institution the library is no longer a mechanism for circulating culture among an elite (however one cares to define the words "culture" and "elite"). It has sent its roots deep into our democratic system, its economy and politics.

The library has become an information machine, essential to countless public, business and individual enterprises. In 1981, to give one measure of this fact, Montgomery county librarians have answered 724,000 reference and research questions.

In Dorchester county the library is becoming deeply involved in efforts to help the economic development of the community and to get more industry and service organizations into the county. "You can't serve the people if you stay in the library," says Director Mary McNally.

Increasingly, the library serves as a community center in place of public school buildings now being closed because of under-enrollment. As an extension of the school system, the library stimulates all of us to become more competent and humane contributors to the public process.

The library has something for everyone in the family—stories and puppet shows to prepare toddlers to read, books and films and records for children and adults, reference and other self-help materials across the gamut of our society's information needs, foreign language materials for our immigrants and students alike and the most complete set of information about community activities and programs.

No other institution has its finger so close to the pulse of community life.

The fact that those who hold the purse strings have so little understanding of the crucial role played by libraries in our society is doubly distressing when one considers that the public libraries now face a quantum leap equal to that created by George Ticknor a century and a half ago.

As we move beyond the industrial age into the "age of information" predicted by futurologists, the issues before them are many.

How can the library satisfy the information needs of all sectors of a democratic society?

What should the relationship be between the current physical plant and the impending electronic revolution of print media?

What constitutes "equal access" and how can it best be achieved?

How can the libraries respond better to the needs of their users and not the self-perpetuating needs of a bureaucratic structure?

In an age of information explosion, how and by what criteria do we choose what information to keep and what to destroy?

How do we assess the relative claims of the past and the future? Those of productivity versus those of reflection and criticism?

In a society based on the principle of free, informed choice—whose economy runs on information as much as on gas—the public library must be a quintessential resource. Instead, it is being treated like a stepchild.