

Portland State University

PDXScholar

English Faculty Publications and Presentations

English

3-20-2022

Small and Rural Libraries have Persevered Amid Challenges

Kathi Inman Berens

Portland State University, kberens@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_fac



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Berens, Kathi Inman. (2022). "Small and Rural Libraries have Persevered Amid Challenges," *The Oregonian*.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

BOOKS

Small and rural libraries have persevered amid challenges

They were first to offer adjusted services in the pandemic

Kathi Inman Berens
For The Oregonian/OregonLive

When the Public Library Association holds its 2022 conference in Portland this Wednesday to Friday, those overseeing the event will include Stephanie Chase, an association board member and the executive director of the Libraries of Eastern Oregon.

Libraries of Eastern Oregon is a consortium of 15 rural county libraries, about a third of which are staffed by just one person.

Though the staff numbers are small, the resource sharing cooperative covers about half of Oregon's terrain. Indeed, a large majority of U.S. public libraries — 77% — serve rural populations of 25,000 and less. And 25% of public libraries serve populations of less than 2,500.

Small and rural libraries, Chase said, were the first to offer adjusted services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As more people requested ebooks and audiobooks, the Eastern Oregon libraries increased their investment in digital access to books.

"Because we cover such a vast geographic range," noted Chase, "COVID hasn't had as much impact as it may have. We've needed to work virtually for some time."

Libraries of Eastern Oregon works in tandem with the Sage Library System, a consortium of 77 libraries in eastern and central Oregon, to provide a unified catalog for school, academic, and public libraries. Sage also drives books across LEO's 15 counties.

In addition to geography, Oregon's rural libraries face another challenge: wariness of taxes and government spending. Several libraries have shuttered when taxpayers rejected levies to fund them.

In 2007, Josephine County, directly south of Roseburg, defunded its four libraries. For the next 10 years, those libraries were staffed by 360 volunteers. Small donations from 2,000 people and three separate campaigns to create permanent, stable funding through the formation of a library district that can levy taxes finally led to the reopening of Josephine Community Library in Grants Pass in January 2018. JCL is open 32 hours weekly. Josephine's other three library branches in Illinois Valley, Williams, and Wolf Creek are open between 15-22 hours a week.

A long decade of struggle lay ahead for the city of Roseburg, too, when its library was shut May 31, 2017. Douglas County voters denied a \$70 per-household tax measure in November 2016 that would have supported the county's 11 libraries.

But voters in Roseburg, the county seat, had approved the levy, and City Manager Lance Colley — on the verge of retirement after 35 years of public service — took the approval as a mandate to reopen his city's library.

"Our library is 30,000 square feet. You can't rely on volunteer labor to run that," said Colley, noting that "seven or eight" other Douglas County libraries operate today exclusively on volunteer labor for



The former Douglas County Library, seen in 2018, is now the Roseburg Public Library, open 32 hours a week. Staff file

77% of U.S. libraries serve rural populations of 25,000 and less.

very limited hours. At least two Douglas County libraries have been lights-out since 2017.

Colley proposed that Roseburg's library share space with Douglas County's Educational Services Department, which had been scouting a new location. Blocking off 10,000 square feet of the library for the department and making some renovations was the first step in site sharing.

Even with the educational services department on board, there remained a 66% funding gap. Colley pulled in an astonishing \$750,000 in five months, turning to local philanthropists and winning several five-figure state grants.

"Roseburg is one of the most philanthropic communities anywhere in Oregon, led by the Ford Family Foundation," Colley said. CHI Mercy Health, the Cow Creek Tribe of Umpqua Indians, the Collins Foundation, and the Bruce Family Foundation also stepped up.

Less than one year after raising the funds, the Roseburg Public Library celebrated a grand opening. Librarians from across the state who'd helped Colley refashion the former county library into a city-funded one came to celebrate.

Fifteen months later, COVID shut the library along with everything else. Library director Kris Wiley increased access to digital lending and her team provided frequent curbside services. The library handed out 500 grab-and-go craft kits to kids and streamed virtual story hours via Facebook in English and Spanish. The library loaned 48,128 items in 2020-2021 — a whopping 62% of its full collection.

At a time people were isolated, Roseburg Public Library tallied 131,861 visits in 2020-21 alone. Service like that would have been impossible with a volunteer staff.

HERE IS OREGON PARTNER UPDATE



Awardees pose with Governor Kate Brown at the 2021 Oregon Travel and Tourism Industry Achievement Awards, presented at the 2022 Oregon Governor's Conference on Tourism at the Sunriver Resort, Monday, March 14. (Courtesy: Travel Oregon)

Travel Oregon announces travel & tourism industry achievement awards at statewide conference

By Travel Oregon staff

This week, the Oregon Tourism Commission (dba Travel Oregon) announced the recipients of the 2021 Oregon Travel and Tourism Industry Achievement Awards. The awards were presented at the 2022 Oregon Governor's Conference on Tourism at the Sunriver Resort.

Awardees included:

- Oregon Governor's Tourism Award Eric Aebi with Chemeketa Community College.
- Central Oregon's Rising Star Serena Bishop Gordon of Visit Bend.
- Portland Region's Rising Star Wela Negelspach with the Columbia County Economic Team.
- Willamette Valley's Rising Star Katie McFall with the Willamette Valley Visitor's Association.
- Southern Oregon's Rising Star Jessica Batchelor with Experience Roseburg.
- Eastern Oregon's Rising Star Kate Harbour with the Eastern Oregon Visitor's Association.
- Mt. Hood and the Columbia River Gorge Region Rising Star Marlee Boxler, City of Troutdale.
- Oregon Coast's Rising Star Karen Olson with the North Coast Tourism Management Network
- Oregon Leadership Award celebrates Jeff Knapp, Executive Director of Visit McMinnville.
- Oregon Partnership Award recognizes RARE Program Director, Titus Tomlinson.
- Oregon Tourism Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Award honored Gwen Trice, Founder of Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center.
- Gene Landsmann Gemütlichkeit Award presented to Kathleen O'Connor-McNew, a long-time member of Oregon's ski industry.

For a complete list of the awards and pictures from the conference, visit [HereisOregon.com](https://www.hereisoregon.com) or scan the QR code:



HereisOregon.com
@HereisOregon

Share the good.
#HereisOregon

Let's lift and celebrate Oregon — the people, the places, the experiences and the diversity of culture and skills that inspire innovation and build community.

We're partnering to bring you the best of Oregon. Want to share your story here?
Email us: hello@hereisoregon.com