Small and Rural Libraries have Persevered Amid Challenges

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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 and closed two branches. 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 a week.

“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.

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