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Library System Requests Budget Increase

CUMBERLAND COUNTY, PA – The Cumberland County Library System board requested that the Cumberland County commissioners increase the county’s special library tax for its 2017 budget year during a public meeting at the Cumberland County Courthouse today. If approved, this would be the library system’s first tax increase in 13 years.

Paul Fisher, the library system board’s treasurer and Jonelle Darr, library system executive director, outlined three options for the Commissioners’ consideration. Each option would allow the system’s eight libraries to sustain and improve services, provide new materials, improve technology and to deliver services without making further service cuts or using dwindling financial reserves.

“If this increase is not approved,” Darr said, “projections show that the library system’s financial reserves for operating expenses will be exhausted by 2018 and service cuts will need to be made.”

For the average property owner whose home is assessed at \$177,700, the proposed options for increases ranged from a low of \$5.51 to high of \$6.75. This would be either a 1.3% or 1.6% increase in the county’s overall property tax levy.

The funding increase was requested due to multiple factors: increased use of libraries; significant state funding cuts; changes in how library services are provided; inflation since the last tax increase; and use of the system’s dwindling financial reserves.

Darr said that last year, citizens borrowed more than 2.5 million items from the library system. “On a per capita basis, the Cumberland County Library System remains the busiest county library system in Pennsylvania for the 17th year in a row.”

A lot of this usage is credited to high numbers of children and families using the library. Darr said that parents’ awareness of the importance of making sure their children are ready to enter school plus the efforts of library staff to reach children living in at-risk communities have driven much of the increases in children’s use of libraries.

For example, Darr said, this past summer the library system saw its highest number of participants ever in its annual summer reading program. “We had 8,647 kids participate in this year’s program. Compared to the summer reading program offered 13 years ago when the last tax increase occurred, this was a 42% increase in the number of kids who had fun at the library while maintaining their hard-earned reading skills over the summer,” she remarked.

Changes to online library services have also caused big increases in the number of people who use library services. For example, in 2004 only 37,048 online requests for materials were made. Last year, 344,678 online requests were made by people across the county – an 830% increase in the number of items that needed to be retrieved by library staff for people to pick-up.

Darr said that eBooks and downloadable audios were also not a part of library services in 2004, but they are now. More than 100,000 of these items were loaned last year.

Public computer use has also increased 21% since 2004. “Our library system’s computers have become a safety net for the thousands of people in Cumberland County who can’t afford Internet access, but still need to apply for a job or obtain government services online,” Darr said. Plus, she added, the library system’s Wi-Fi network services were used by 227,259 people in 2015.

“Like eBooks and downloadable audios, many of these technology services didn’t even exist 13 years ago when the last tax increase was approved,” Darr said.

Other factors cited for the request included reductions in state funding. “The library system’s state support was cut more than \$5 million since 2008,” Darr said. This loss coupled with the cost of living increasing 27% over the past 13 years has not allowed the library system’s budget to keep pace with existing or new costs.

Paul Fisher, treasurer of the library system board, said that since the recession and state funding reductions, the library system has made service cuts and used its ‘rainy day’ funds to maintain library services to the best of its ability.

“Now, those financial reserves have reached danger zone levels. Prudent financial practices show that no more withdrawals should be made,” Fisher said.

Without a funding increase in 2017, Fisher said that library system’s financial reserves for operating expenses would be exhausted by 2018 and significant service cuts must be made.

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