

Slide 1

Tough Decisions in Tough Times

A rural library perspective

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What is "Rural"?

- Rural Libraries < 25,000
- Country, agriculture
- Usually one if any MLS
- Mayberryesque
- Everyone knows everybody
- Staff "knows" each other & may be related
- Know everyone's business
- Focus on:
 - Impact
 - Strategies
 - Coping Skills

Slide 2

Loss of Funding Impacts:

- Budget
- Staff
- Director
- Board of Trustees
- Patrons

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What and who does loss of funding impact?

- Direct impact on Budget

Indirectly on:

- Staff
- Director
- Board of Trustees
- Patrons

Slide 3

Impact: Budget

- Identify mandated expenses
(electricity, utilities, payroll, etc.)
- Keep staff – no layoffs if possible
- Cut materials budget
(rely on staff to find information, utilize ILL, online resources, etc.)

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Budget impact:

- You have to keep the lights on and the toilets flushing
- In small towns, lay-offs can be devastating to families. Adds to economic problems in community.

Consider cutting the materials budget before cutting staff. The staff is trained to get the info in the hands of the patrons.

Slide 4

Impact: Staff

- Freeze on new positions
- No raises or COLAs
- Cut staff hours
- Increased cost-share of health insurance

Staff impact:

- Freeze hiring of replacements or new positions
- Staff will have to go without merit raises or cost-of-living adjustments
- Staff may have to work fewer hours, i.e.: everyone works five hours less a week
- Staff pay an increased percentage of health insurance

Slide 5

Impact: Director

- Keep moral high
- Liaison with media
- Liaison with public
- Liaison with government officials
- Stay current with funding updates

Impact on Director:

- The director has to keep moral high when he or she may be sinking fast
- Must keep the message "in the media"
- Also has to be the buffer with the public -- explaining cut hours, no new materials, raised fees, etc.
- Must continuously be in contact with legislators
- Must stay current with federal and state budget issues that directly impact public library funding

Slide 6

Impact: Board of Trustees

- Tough decisions
- Work with Director
- Liaisons with public
- Network with other Boards
- Work the phones calling legislators

Impact on the Board:


- The Board will make tough decisions based on the recommendations of the director and the fiscal officer
- They are volunteers with heavy burdens placed on their shoulders
- More important than ever to join a strong network of other library boards

Must contact legislators and emphasize need for stable state library funding

Slide 7

Impact: Patrons

- Fewer open hours
- Fewer or no new materials
- Computers not working
- Wait longer for materials
- May not receive timely service




The patrons are impacted:

- Library may now be closed on Saturdays and Sundays or other week-day
- They will not see new best-sellers, new movies, etc.
- Computers may "go down" and leave fewer to access -- also, not updated
- Patrons will request items via ILL and have to wait longer
- They may have to wait longer for specialized reference, genealogy, or other library service, or to check out materials.

Slide 8

Strategies:

- Immediately raise revenue
- Lobby for stable funding
- Work towards local funding (levy)
- Develop talking points
- Stay on message



What can you do right now? Doing "something" gives you a sense of control:

- Find a way to get more money into the library
- Get to know your state legislators and start talking
- Start testing the waters for local funding
- Develop talking points for everyone
- Stay on message

Slide 9

Strategy: Raise Revenue

- Increase overdue fines
- Increase fees for faxing
- Increase fees for photocopies
- Charge fee for DVD loan & ILL delivery



Ideas for Raising Revenue:

- Increase fines to .25 a day. We budget for a revenue of \$12,000 a year from overdue fines
- Increase fees for faxes
- Increase fees for photocopies
- Charge .50 per checkout of movies (cannot charge for books and still be a "free public library" in Ohio)
- Charge .50 for "delivery" of ILL

Slide 10

Strategy: Lobby for Funding

- KNOW your legislators
- Involve all staff and Board
- Focus on numbers – service
- Share successful models
- Squeaky wheel




Be active! Get involved! Use your voice!

- Utilize the existing governmental contact networks through your state library association
- Post the names, addresses, e-mails, phone numbers of your areas legislators on your webpage, on bookmarks, on posters, on talking points flyers.
- Insure that your staff and Board know all these names and how to contact
- Start counting... how many children attended programs last year. How many books checked out. How many unemployed used library computers to find jobs, etc.
- Look to successful states like Save Ohio Libraries and Save New Jersey Libraries
- Be vocal when the call goes out to be vocal -- be the squeaky wheel. Ohio librarians wear red on legislative day. Phone calls during Summer of 2009 froze phone system at capital in Columbus. E-mails crashed legislative servers. Citizens were loud and persistent. Instead of potential 50% cut, libraries received 10% cut

Slide 11

Strategy: Work Towards Local Funding

- Identify funding/taxing options
- Attend levy workshops
- Ask auditor questions
- Form PAC



Start considering the "four-letter-word"... LEVY

- Talk to your local auditor to find out options for local funding taxes
- Attend workshops
- Start forming a political action committee whose sole purpose will be to get a library levy passed
- Talk to your election board for election guidelines
- This may be a learning process for everyone
- Our levy passed on second try

Strategy: Develop Talking Points

- All staff & ALL Board members have same talking points
- Identify key points of service areas & usage patterns
- Numbers, Numbers, Numbers



Everybody needs to "know" the information:

- Nothing worse than a staff member being asked about library funding and they answer, "I don't know"... Small towns expect them to know.
- Work on key messages and talking points
- Identify key service messages and numbers served.

Examples: The library receives 90% of their revenue through state funding. The state funding is being cut by 50%. We cannot continue to provide quality library service without your help.

During tough times, people turn to the public library. Instead of buying books, they borrow them. Instead of renting movies, they borrow them. Instead of subscribing to magazines, they borrow them. Instead of paying for Internet access at home, they use the library computers.

Over 500 children were introduced to the library and the joy of reading during story time programs in 2009. Over fifty of your neighbors attended computer classes that taught them how to find jobs online, write their resumes and more...

Slide 13

Strategy: Stay on Message

- Focus on Talking Points
- Focus on tradition of service
- Staff will “know” message
- Patrons will “know” message

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Learn "active listening skills". Do not be distracted.

- When a citizen complains about high taxes, encourage them to use the library -- they will save money each year!
- Share that your library has been providing quality library service to your area for so many years. Your area uses and values public library service
- Repeat the messages so often that your patrons will also learn to repeat the messages

Slide 14

Coping Skills:

- Staff meetings – Keep staff in the “loop”
- Flex schedules
- Re-strategize evaluation process
- Social activities
- Chocolate

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During these challenging and sometimes tumultuous times, you need coping skills:

- Do not operate in secrecy.
- Provide opportunities for staff to work flexible schedules
- Rethink scheduling yearly evaluations
- Encourage social activities
- Sponsor chocolate taste-testing parties

Slide 15

Coping Skills: Staff Meetings

- Meet monthly
- E-mail with updates
- Listen to concerns & ideas
- Staff is part of the solution

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Your staff is your number one asset. Keep them in the loop. Do not keep funding news secret:

- Consider meeting each month -- a few days after a board meeting is a good time. Schedule the meeting before the library opens.
- E-mail staff or distribute written memos with all updates and news
- Listen to all of their concerns. Is the board going to close our branch? Does the board want to lay off staff?
- Ask the staff to offer suggestions for cost-cutting and revenue enhancing. Again, they are your experts.

Slide 16

Coping Skills: Flex Schedules

- Cutting staff hours? Ask for input for hours worked
- Allow voluntary furloughs
- Cut staff hours rather than lay off

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Relax firm-scheduling regulations:

- Provide an opportunity for staff to participate in deciding the schedule -- based on the needs of the library and hours open
- Offer voluntary furloughs
- Ask staff to consider cutting their hours each week across the board rather than laying one of their co-workers off

Slide 17

Coping Skills: Evaluations

- Informally meet with staff to ascertain issues, challenges and share solutions
- Consider holding off on "high stress" evaluations

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Evaluations are stressful:

- Even though each employee "knows" their own performance levels, evaluations are an important tool to identify strengths and areas that might need improvement
- Instead of formal, stressful evaluations, sit down with staff and have an honest discussion
- Consider delaying (temporarily) on evaluations

Slide 18

Coping Skills: Social Activities

- Potlucks & Baked Goodies
- Contests (March Madness)
- Pizza
- Celebrate Joys
- Relay for Life
- Laugh (Humor)

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Encourage comradely:

- Schedule staff luncheons
- Participate in contests (March Madness)
- Treat everyone to pizza (petty cash?)
- Enjoy outings together (a group went together to a Parade of Homes for ideas when a co-worker was building a home)
- Hold baby showers, wedding shows, housewarming showers
- Form a Relay for Life team
- Laugh -- a lot

Slide 19

Coping Skills: Chocolate

- Seriously
- Stimulates endorphins
- Dark chocolate really does good stuff
- Distribute to each department and to patrons

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Keep a never-ending supply of chocolate on hand:

- Distribute it equally (if possible) throughout your rural library system -- include branches
- Sponsor a chocolate taste-testing party
- Also put a dish of chocolate kisses out to patrons

Slide 20

Tough Decisions in Tough Times in Rural Libraries

- Identify **Impact** on staff, Board, public & Director
- Identify **Strategies** for budget cuts
- Identify **Coping skills**

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Tough times demand tough decisions be made by rural library administrators. We cannot avoid it:

- Decisions will impact the staff, the board and the public. Recognize that impact.
- If you are the director, the tough decisions will impact you. This is the tough part of your job
- Work hard to find the best strategies for budget cuts -- if you cut hours you impact patrons more than if you cut the book budget
- Come up with coping skills, for the director, board and staff

Slide 21

Tough Decisions in Tough Times in Rural Libraries

- Develop strategies to improve or insure stable funding
- Adopt "Coping Skills" for all who have a vested interest in challenges


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- Roll up your sleeves and become a vocal advocate for your rural library system on a state and federal level
- Stay on message and remember the coping skills you have adopted. Everyone will need to lighten up at times

Slide 22

Conclusion

- Tough decisions become easier to handle when you have the information you need – gives you “control”
- Tough decisions are more palatable by staff & public when kept in the loop



In conclusion:

- We feel out of control when we do not have the information we need to make informed decisions
- When we lack the information, we are lost, floundering, helpless
- Take back control and be proactive
- Give the power to the people -- your staff, your public
- The tough decisions will be more readily accepted by staff and public when they are kept in the loop and keep informed.

Thank you for your kind attention. Keep the faith!