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## County library delivers on election promises

### THE NEWS TRIBUNE

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Pierce County library users agreed last fall to put up the bucks. Now the library system is delivering the goods.

Libraries from Bonney Lake to University Place and Gig Harbor to South Hill celebrated Father's Day by launching an impressive expansion of library hours made possible by voters' approval of a levy lid life last September.

Nine of the library system's 17 branches are now open Sundays 1 to 5 p.m. Six of them also have new Thursday evening hours, and all are now open on Mondays. Together, it adds up to a 20 percent increase in library hours systemwide.

Last fall's ballot measure followed several tough budget years during which property tax revenues couldn't keep pace with the library system's rising costs. Under Initiative 747's tax lid, the library district's property tax levy had dwindled from 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value to only 40 cents per \$1,000.

Library officials pared \$1 million from their budget between 2002 and 2006. Faced with another round of cuts last year, they opted to take their case to voters — who responded with a 56 percent approval to the question of restoring the old levy rate.

That ability to approach library patrons directly is one benefit of a stand-alone district. Tacoma's public libraries depend on City Hall for their funding and can suffer the consequences when city finances are tight or the City Council has other priorities.

In recent years, those libraries have balanced their books in recent years with rolling closures and a staff reorganization that left outlying branches without reference librarians. None of the city libraries are open on Sundays.

But with Pierce library's direct access to tax dollars comes a heightened demand for accountability. Library officials promised to add services if voters agreed to tax themselves more. The good news is that library is delivering.

Under the levy lid lift approved last fall, the owner of the average \$244,000 home now pays an extra \$27 a year — a bargain for what he or she is getting in return. In addition to the expanded hours, the library system has begun offering a wider variety of books and online services. It also cut the wait time for popular books from 19 weeks to 12.

More improvements are coming. Library officials plan to add reading and homework help for kids and teens, additional computers with Internet access and computer classes for adults by the end of 2007.

That focus on delivering what was promised is plain responsible stewardship of public dollars. It also will keep the library system in good standing for the next time it needs voters to reaffirm their support for public libraries.

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