

> **Budget Cuts**

## Protect libraries – and protect our capacity to prosper

We come from two distinctly different backgrounds – one of us is currently the mayor of a small suburban town; the other, the former mayor of a large city. One of us has a background in business and economic development; the other, in law and public policy.

We come from opposite sides of the aisle politically, but there is at least one thing we agree on: the proposed cuts to Local Government Aid (LGA) will have a profound and devastating impact on the City of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library. The cuts to LGA would solve only about one percent of Minnesota's total deficit problem, but could affect people from all over the state as libraries, police and firefighters are forced to reduce services.

The City of Saint Paul is facing serious budget difficulties as a result of the loss of LGA from the State of Minnesota. For the Saint Paul Public Library, this lost LGA may result in a 14% (\$2 million) cut to its 2009 budget, closure of one branch library, cuts to hours in all libraries, and a \$400,000 cut to the books and materials budget.

The Library contributes to the economic development of Saint Paul, working closely and competently with the leadership of our city to improve the entire community. It builds strategic partnerships with other public agencies and programs to provide services with broad, nonpartisan appeal. As Library Director Huggins recently reminded us, libraries are not in the “book” business. They are in the business of learning and development — aligning their resources with the needs of the community. The library has the tools to help people

apply for jobs, prepare their children to learn, and support youth in school success, with well-trained staff to assist.

**Nobody stretches** a public dollar further than libraries. The return on investment can be measured in expanded access, more passionate and qualified staff, higher circulation, more relevant materials, better outreach, more computers and increased bandwidth -- all of which equal more use of libraries. That, in turn, translates to more educated workers with increased earnings, drops in crime, lower welfare rates and a more successful society.

Over the past several years, the Library has worked to trim its spending while expanding access to the resources it offers. From 2002 through 2008:

- staff levels have increased just over 3%
- library hours system-wide have increased almost 9%
- the number of visitors has gone up over 45%
- public computer access has increased 418%
- homework help and learning center usage is up ten-fold!

**In an average week**, library staff may field 700 requests for assistance with resumes and job applications, technology and small business resources. Clearly, the Saint Paul Public Library is doing more with less for a greater segment of the population. And the Library is not the only organization working to reduce the cost of providing services. The City of Saint Paul levies less than half of what Minneapolis does per capita in taxes.

The concept of equal access for all is one of the most important aspects of a strong democracy and one that promotes healthy public support for libraries. We place

great value on our shared community assets. The library, with its quiet, orderly ambiance, offers a safe, social setting to explore knowledge without limits. It levels the playing field by meeting the day-to-day information needs of our residents regardless of age, economic status, educational background or geographical location. Many see the library as a reflection of a community's stature, so a thriving library reflects a healthy community.

**In 1779, John Adams** declared that one of the fundamental duties of government is to provide for education. Adams argued for public funding because he realized the importance of educated voters to the well being of a democracy. Perhaps he also understood the economic benefits that flow to the general public when its members have the resources they need to acquire and maintain productive employment. Now, 230 years later, our libraries are providing the resources and access to technology our citizens need to not just survive, but thrive in this challenging 21st century economy.

The Library transforms lives in the City of Saint Paul - helping people find jobs, supporting education and lifelong learning, providing access to information and telecommunications services, empowering families, enabling civic engagement, promoting literacy and connecting communities. In these troubled economic times, our library is even more critical as our citizen's purchasing power has evaporated and the need for its services and resources has soared. The alternative to strong public support of our library has a price none of us is willing or able to bear.

**Tom Swain is the Mayor of Lilydale and a retired executive VP of Travelers. George Latimer is a former Mayor of Saint Paul. Both serve on the board of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.**