



## Merced County library system still stands out in times of big budget concerns



By [Jonathan Whitaker](#) On Jul 25, 2019

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The 261 pages of Merced County’s proposed 2019-20 fiscal year budget contain a massive amount of financial data, including revenue and cost projections for more than 40 significant departments, from Animal Control to Workforce Investment.

It’s a projected \$670 million budget in all — an increase of \$45.6 million from last year — and a majority of it involves a convoy of federal and state revenues accelerating down the pike. The giant Human Services Agency, for example, with more than 700 employees, will be hitching onto a lot of that money.

Then there’s the county’s “discretionary resources” rooted in its own General Fund with about \$141 million in funding for services. Well, 54 percent of that is headed to “public safety,” and many would argue, rightfully so.

However, it’s interesting to point out that when county supervisors and department heads held their most recent Town Hall series in communities across the region, some of the more notable public comments concerned an area of the budget that amounts to only \$3.8 million in annual spending, including a mere 24 employees.

“This year the library was talked about at quite a few of those meetings,” said Amy Taylor, the county’s top librarian, during an interview the Times requested. “Sometimes I did a lot of the talking. People asked about what was going on.”

Some wanted to know about new features and events currently happening, according to Taylor, others asked about the likelihood of increasing library hours and days of service.

To the latter, Taylor would ultimately refer questions to the elected members of the Board of Supervisors, because they are the ones who have the final say in the annual budget.

Requests to keep library doors open longer have been a constant in recent years. Many residents might be surprised to learn that this county once had 22 library branches, compared to the 12 it has today; or the fact that the Main Branch in Merced used be open until 8 p.m. — back in the 1980s.

The rural community of Planada had its own library. So did Ballico.

More recently, in 2014, the board took a series of actions to improve operations, materials and services, staffing needs and “changing hours to meet the needs of the community.” However, four small library branches were closed in the process — places like Cressey, Stevinson, South Dos Palos, and even Merced. The trade off was the implementation of the popular “Bookmobile” concept. Obviously, a mobile library could cover more ground and reach farther into underserved areas.

Of the existing 12 branches today, four of them are only open three days a week, and three of them are just open two days a week.

Last year, the board approved a “shift” in open hours — not an increase — in places like Delhi, Le Grand, Santa Nella and Winton. The shift was basically moving hours later in the afternoon so closing time would be at 6 p.m. The idea was to provide more access to children and families after school and work hours.

But was that enough?

Taylor says she continues to hear from parents who say they don’t have enough time, once they get off work at 5 p.m. or so, to get their children to the library before it closes. Not to mention older students and adults who would like to spend evenings at the library for pleasure, study or research.

In a 2018 countywide survey with 675 responses, 71 percent of residents said they had a library card, 60 percent said they visited the library at least once a month, and a whopping 81 percent said they would like evening hours. These responses were among other things like “more days open” and “upgrades to facilities.”

Just last week, at the July 16 meeting of the Board of Supervisors, a Snelling resident and a 20-year member of the Library Advisory Commission echoed many of the same desires in comments to leaders.

And she did it quite convincingly.

“I’ve seen the budget for the library system go up and down,” said Cathy Weber. “I’m here to ask that you increase the next budget for the Merced County Library. I firmly believe that restoring evening hours to the Main Library and large branches is essential to making the library

user friendly, and a significant community resource. In the past when the Merced Main Branch was open evenings, there were students and adults alike, busy using available library resources and enjoying their time together there. Evenings were such vibrant busy times. Also many rural county residents need to rely on a free library for their families reading material. When I joined the commission there were eight branches in District 4 — most of them were quite small but served a large rural population. There are now five, plus service by the Bookmobile for those branches that closed. Currently though, Bookmobile service is not available or is severely restricted due to a non-functioning generator impacting air conditioning. ...

“As an example of what branch libraries or what a Bookmobile can mean to rural communities, my Snelling library is very small; however, the availability of books through the county’s inter-library services make so many books readily available that our branch is well used. Also the computers are extremely important. Because of limited rural access and cost, many residents don’t have Internet at home. Due to budget constraints, our branch hours have been cut ... We need more hours for rural branches and a functional Bookmobile ... My fervent hope is that you will fund the library system to a level that it can provide the requested evening hours and address our other important needs. Our county residents deserve an accessible first-rate library system like those in nearby counties.”

When asked by the Times to respond, Taylor admitted the current Bookmobile is vulnerable to the punishing Valley heat. The generator often overheats, and replacement or enhancement options for that particular vehicle are not available in the county’s tool shed. The Bookmobile is functioning this summer, but it’s only open for one hour at any given location. She does say there is some light at the end of the tunnel: Outside grant funding is being pursued for a brand new mobile unit.

Taylor also points out that while the Merced County’s library system is sometimes compared to other nearby counties, funding streams vary from region to region. Stanislaus County, for example, has 13 branches (only one more than Merced County) with more than 70 employees, compared to 24 in this county. But the big difference is Stanislaus has a local sales tax measure that supplies major funding. The Merced County Library gets its funding from the county’s General Fund.

Also, the Stanislaus Library management team has about six or seven supervisors, while Taylor says her system has only three that are working day-to-day with staff. That’s one of the reasons why her department is requesting an additional two supervisor positions in this year’s budget to help staff and also implement an array of programming.

So far, those positions are not recommended for approval in the proposed budget. The same goes for another staffer Taylor would like to see added — a support service analyst who would work with Information Technology to promote library services and get the word out about educational events.

Taylor took a deep breath when asked about the possibility of a funding increase, saying she can only hope for more. In addition to added staff, and expanded hours of service, she would love to

see upgrades to facilities. Most of the branches still have the same furniture — including staff work stations — that they had when they originally opened decades ago.

That said, her eyes do light up when asked about the current performance of local libraries.

“We are thriving,” she said excitedly. “We are thriving within our means. Our Summer Reading Program is doing great. We surpassed our numbers from last year. It’s great to see so many people coming in.”

“Surpassed” is an understatement. The Summer Reading Program has brought in more than 3,000 participants, blowing away last year’s total of 1,400. And there are still two weeks left to go.

Taylor says the program is open to all ages.

“We want adults to participate and model the behavior of reading,” she said. “A child’s best teacher is the adults that they have in their life on a daily basis. ... If they see their grandparents or aunts and uncles reading then they are more than likely to pick up a book and read for pleasure.”

Among the many features of the program, some 55 paid performers entertain participants across the county. Taylor calls that a fantastic opportunity especially for small rural areas with populations who would not otherwise be exposed to such talent at a free and inviting place such as the local library.

Community events held logically at the library may be the key to getting more evening hours, Taylor said.

She said leaders approved the library staying open into the evening on Aug. 9 for a Back-To-School Backpack Giveaway sponsored by the Tsunami Organization, the United Way and the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce.

The county also targets the library system during heat waves like the one experienced this week. All branches are considered “cooling zones” for residents in need of escaping the heat.

Other library innovations include the opening up of a dedicated “Teen Space” at the Main Branch, catering to that special age group. Adults can now enjoy free online access to all of the New York Times resources. They also can browse the Merced Sun-Star website without having to worry about subscription costs.

Thanks to a grant, the library now offers ZipBook service. Cardholders can request books the library doesn’t have through the online service, and those books will be delivered directly to their private homes. The books are then returned to the library where they will remain in the catalog for others to enjoy. Because of this program, Taylor says her budget for books has risen an incredible \$13,000 to a total of \$18,000.

Final budget talks for the Merced County Board of Supervisors are expected in the coming weeks. The board is set to meet this coming Tuesday, July 30, at 10 a.m., inside the chamber located on the third floor of the County Administration Building, 2222 M Street.