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Narrative and Data to Address Questions Raised by Curry County's Proposed Advisory Ballot Measure on the Consolidation of Curry County Special District Libraries

*compiled by the directors of Curry County's libraries
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Also included in email:

OAR 543-010-0036 - Public Library Minimum Conditions

Oregon Library Association Public Library Standards

Introduction

The following narrative and data was compiled to address incorrect and unclear data upon which the draft for Curry County’s advisory measure regarding special district libraries appears to be based. We realize that many civic leaders do not understand the full extent to which libraries collect data on usage, provide services in compliance with state rules for libraries and with the guidance of the state library, and shape our programs to meet community needs through the creation of community informed strategic planning (both Chetco and Gold Beach libraries completed strategic plans this year). We also know that this data resides in places that are not always easy to locate. For this reason, we have attempted to compile and summarize key information to provide context address inaccurate and unclear assumptions embedded in the proposed advisory question.

Curry County’s Physical Libraries Are Needed and Heavily Used

The proposed Ballot Summary says: “With the advances in technology, many residents no longer need a physical library. Rather, many traditional services are now available electronically from the convenience of one’s home.” The Order language states, “whereas in 2020 most residents have electronic access from their home to those services traditionally provided by a library.”

Data shows that this statement is not accurate. Curry County Libraries are used in person now more than ever, and access to technology is one of the primary reasons the library is still needed. As technology becomes more and more vital, the library’s free access to technology and technology training will continue to become even more important to Curry County residents.

Traditional library services are being heavily utilized, and we continue to add more services and collaborate with other community agencies in substantial ways. Publicly accessible rooms for use by non-profits and other community groups are consistently booked and there is a waiting list for access.

2018-2019 Curry County Library Statistics as Reported to the State of Oregon at:

www.oregon.gov/library

	Library Visitors	Physical checkouts	Electronic checkouts	Library Program Attendees *	Public Computer Uses	Wifi Internet Uses
Agness	640	1,284	160	56	238	295
Langlois	9,700	15,021	753	890	2,910	3,600
Port Orford	43,990	49,310	2,692	7,754	8,211	22,895
Curry	146,241	53,898	5,414	9,244	12,169	21,549
Chetco	91,680	190,281	20,989	4,092	15,292	25,422
County Total:	292,251	309,794	30,008	22,036	38,820	73,761

*Library-hosted programs only—this number does not include meeting room usage by the public.

Existing electronic access from home

The Commissioner's proposal makes a flawed assumption that our residents have digital access from their homes. Statistics on digital access vary depending on the source, but according to 2019 Census estimates, 26% of Curry County residents did not have a broadband internet connection 2014-2018. And of those who have broadband access, many have extremely slow connections, and many do not have the equipment or skills needed to access our electronic resources. And many more still prefer physical books and in-person interaction to ebooks and virtual assistance. From March-May 2020 when the schools in Curry County shifted to online learning, students throughout the region struggled to find ways to reliably connect to the internet to consult with teachers and complete their school work. Surveys conducted through the school districts indicate that of homes with internet access, a large number of them only have access through a single device with a limited data plan, which is inadequate for online learning. Our statistics show that Curry County libraries have 10 times the physical checkouts than we do electronic checkouts (309,794 vs. 30,008). And just in our county libraries, there were 112,581 computer and wifi sessions. That doesn't include the people who may go sit in a fast food restaurant or other local business to use their wifi. In a county with a population of less than 23,000, those numbers alone show that internet access continues to be a real need.

OAR (Oregon Administrative Rules) on Minimum Requirements for Public Libraries

Referring to "traditional library services" assumes incorrectly that libraries simply provide traditional library services (whatever that may be), and shows a lack of understanding of what libraries today do. We would refer the Commissioners to OAR 543-010-0036 that outlines the minimum requirements for libraries and stresses the importance of physical libraries and a range of services other than physical materials check-out.

As a side note, this OAR was approved in the 2019 legislative session and the bill was co-sponsored by our local representative David Brock Smith.

The full text of the OAR is attached, but some of the key points include:

- the requirement for libraries to have regular hours of public access to a facility;
- the requirement to provide access to paid digital resources (other than Google);
- the requirement to provide free public access to the internet (wired and wirelessly);
- the requirement to provide in-person reference services;
- the requirement to provide in-person youth programs.

Curry County Libraries go above and beyond the minimum requirements, and our usage statistics show that our services are heavily utilized.

Oregon Library Association Public Library Standards

In addition to the statutory requirement to track and report library data, Oregon's public libraries also self-report their progress toward the Oregon Library Association's Public Library Standards Key Performance Measurements (the full standards are attached). This data is used by the State Library to assess how to best use tax dollars to support public libraries. The standards make it quite clear that the notion of a library as a physical hub for circulating books is indeed antiquated, and the reality is that Curry County's libraries have been working successfully for years to provide the public with a much broader set of services to the public, even if county commissioners are not fully aware of these services and successes locally.

These performance measures evaluate and stress the need for libraries to expand the following services:

- programs, outreach, and services for children, teens, and adults;
- educational and cultural programs for all ages;
- early literacy programming;
- technology training;
- relevant digital content;
- resources for job seekers and entrepreneurs;
- resources to meet the need for online government and legal information services;
- invest in physical materials to serve all users.

Consolidation Will Not Result in Improved Efficiencies

As one of the state's smaller counties, the five library districts have done a stellar job working to both meet and exceed the measures above. For example, in response to community needs the three libraries located in cities all provide regular educational and cultural programs, weekly early literacy programs, and meeting spaces dedicated to public programs. At a state level, many Curry County library programs have been recognized as being exemplary, like Curry Public Library's after school program.

One question underlying the advisory question is whether or not these programs are an equitable and efficient use of tax dollars. County Commissioners should note that our library districts have long been aware of the value of shared services. We have maximized the strengths of our current legal configuration, by remaining hyper-local in terms of governance and our ability to shape programs for local circumstances, while voluntarily entering into intergovernmental agreements to save tax payers money. For example, Agness has no youth under the age of 5, and does not allocate resources to youth programs. Langlois, which recently underwent budgetary challenges, reached out to the other county libraries to improve policy and procedures and contracted with the Port Orford Library for interim management, which has resulted in an effective and fiscally stable special district. When Jeremy Skinner was recognized as Oregon's librarian of the year in 2019, a part of the honor was in recognition of his work in mobilizing Curry County's libraries to expand their collaborations, particularly through the Coastline catalog and courier system. At present, libraries collaborate in the following ways to save tax payers money:

- Share an online catalog and library management system with the Coos County libraries.
- Share the costs of a courier system, including a vehicle and a paid driver to exchange library materials.
- Share the costs of technical support for our library system.
- Participate in shared costs for legal, human resources, and insurance through Special Districts Association of Oregon.
- Share the costs of professional development programs, and encourage staff to participate in regional librarian working groups.
- Share the costs of access to subscription databases including: Westlaw legal; Mango Languages; Chilton automotive manuals.
- Share a contract for bulk book purchasing discounts with Ingram Content Group.
- Share a contract for book leasing discounts with McNaughton's/Brodart.
- Share the ownership of some library materials (like Lego robotics kits).
- Participate in the regional collaborative summer reading program, which allows us to share costs of promotional materials and professional programming.
- Shared cataloging and technical processing of library materials.

To ask the voters if they want their libraries to work together to save money is redundant. We do this as a matter of routine, and are constantly seeking ways to further these partnerships and efficiencies. To ask voters if they want to save money in this specific (legally questionable) form through consolidation pre-supposes that this would actually save money, a conclusion for which there is no supporting evidence.

Consolidation Will Not Result in Savings for Taxpayers or Increased Availability of Funds for the County

The Oregon Constitution states the tax rate of the surviving district or successor district is that rate that would produce the same tax revenue as the merging or consolidating districts would have cumulatively produced in the year of consolidation or merger if the consolidation or merger had not occurred. (*Oregon Constitution Article XI, section 11(3)(d)*).

So this means that while the revenue must remain the same, how much each district pays will change. Some residents will end up paying a HIGHER tax rate than they would have without consolidation.

ORS states that upon consolidation, we must merge our Unfunded PERS liabilities and present a plan to the PERS board. That means, for example, the taxpayers in Agness will become partially responsible for the unfunded PERS liability in the other larger locations. And taxpayers across the new consolidated district could become responsible for the \$400,000 that Curry Public Library still owes for its recent expansion/renovation.

For your reference, here are the current tax rates for the five Special District Libraries in Curry County:

District Name	Tax Rate	2019-20 Property Taxes
Agness Library	0.66	20,572
Chetco Community Library	0.43	786,272
Curry Public Library	0.66	460,892
Langlois Public Library	0.77	80,397
Port Orford Library	0.50	141,035
	Average: 0.604	Total: 1,489,168

By comparison, the Coos County Library Service District has a tax rate of 0.73 and collected \$3,858,653.

Proposed questions for the Commissioners' Meeting

- 1.) In drafting this advisory question, what was the definition of “many” in reference to residents no longer needing a physical library? Were actual usage statistics for Curry County libraries consulted? (See page 2.)
- 2.) Are the commissioners aware of the ways in which the county libraries support early learning, school readiness, after school learning, tutoring, mentoring, and summer learning? If so, how do commissioners reconcile the inherent value of these programs with the statement “many residents no longer need a physical library”?
- 3.) In drafting this advisory question, what data was used to evaluate the need or lack of need for publicly accessible internet connectivity in Curry County? (See page 3.)
- 4.) Do the county commissioners believe that given the real data about library usage in Curry County (see page 3) that the ballot summary meets the requirement of being impartial as outlined in OAR 165-022-0040?
- 5.) Is it clear that consolidating districts will result in the same amount of tax revenue being collected for libraries across the county? (See page 6.)
 - a. With that in mind, how does consolidating the districts accomplish the goal of “cost savings,” as mentioned in Mr. Paasch’s July 23, 2020, press release? In that press release, Mr. Paasch says, “If less went to what I perceive as ‘fat’ districts, perhaps people would be more willing to pay more to fund law enforcement and other necessary government services.”
- 6.) Is it clear that consolidating these districts will result in some taxpayers having an increase in property taxes? (See page 6.)
- 7.) In drafting this advisory question, what evidence documents the statement that “some [library districts] have inadequate resources? Tax revenue differences do not automatically translate to inadequate resources—each district serves a different population, and the resources needed in each community are all quite different.
- 8.) As written, the summary of this question states that many residents no longer need a physical library. If this is the case, why ask the voters to consolidate library districts? Wouldn’t the logical conclusion, if the premise were accurate, be that libraries should be closed? Isn’t that the question this premise supports?
- 9.) What is meant by “Special Districts themselves are the only ones who can force a consolidation” and “It is intended for the results of the ballot question to guide them in their consolidation discussions”? The district boards are not currently discussing consolidation, as all agree that it is not in the best interest of our communities. And the boards would never circumvent voter approval to “force” consolidation.
- 10.) What is the value to the governing body of Curry County to assess the public’s opinion about a matter they have no legal grounds to legislate?
- 11.) Are the commissioners aware that the “millions in reserves” referenced in the proposed Order are funds grown through donations, careful management, and investment for specific purposes?