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## Libraries Lose More Than Time

*Hammered by budget cuts, some libraries must cut more than just hours.*

Tod Newcombe | August 2010

Like so many other public-sector services caught up in this recession, libraries have seen demand for their services rise dramatically while budget cuts have forced them to make painful reductions in the very services the public wants. In particular, local governments are reducing operating hours. According to a recent study by the American Library Association (ALA), nearly one-quarter of urban libraries are reporting fewer hours in 2009, compared to a 15 percent reduction for libraries overall.

These cutbacks come when libraries are no longer used for simply checking out books and other types of media material. Some libraries, especially in urban areas, now offer social services and health-care assistance, and provide a vast array of resources and tools for job hunting and improving work skills. They have become islands of public safety, providing a safe and educational haven for children and teens after the school day ends. They also are e-government hubs -- 82 percent of libraries provide Wi-Fi, and 67 percent report that they are the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet in their community, according to the ALA.

Heading into the second decade of the 21st century, the urban library has become America's knowledge center. "The problem is that many leaders think of libraries as they existed in the 1960s and '70s," says Susan Benton, CEO of the Urban Libraries Council. One idea the council would like local officials to consider is the notion of the urban library as a magnet for economic development. The concept is not new, but has taken on importance as some question the direct cost of running libraries. When the Seattle Public Library opened a striking new building in 2004, the number of daily visitors doubled, attracting thousands of people to the city's downtown.

Not every city can build a glittering jewel of a library to attract visitors, but many have put branches in existing malls and other high-traffic locations. By keeping the number of operating hours high, these mall libraries have become extremely popular and by extension, also have brought more people to the shops.

Libraries that anchor new development also have taken hold. Library executives and developers notice that putting a library into mixed use, retail and residential areas brings numerous advantages. In Rockville, Md., a \$352 million redevelopment project in the downtown district includes 644 condominiums, 180,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, and a new public library -- Montgomery County's largest.

Developers like having libraries in their developments for the visitors they bring and because libraries don't compete with local businesses. While these new library structures may not invoke the familiar look of the classical Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, they continue to project the power and purpose of a very public place.

This article was printed from: <http://www.governing.com/libraries-lose-more-time.html>