


All Booked Up

THE RECESSION HAS PEOPLE FLOCKING TO LIBRARIES, BUT LOCAL CITIES ARE BEING FORCED TO CUT THEIR BUDGETS. WILL THERE BE A HAPPY ENDING?

By Kristen De Deyn Kirk



Hampton Library Director Robert “Robin” Carpenter can’t escape what’s going on around him. Just outside his office in Hampton’s main library, workers are painting walls, removing carpet and rearranging furniture. The building is a bit noisy and messy, so Carpenter closes his door when he wants to talk.

He hasn’t allowed the controlled chaos to stand in his way. He gets his work done, and so do the patrons around him. While the much-needed renovation (after a 22-year lapse in updating the constructed-in-1987 building) could have scared visitors away, it hasn’t. In fact, Carpenter estimates he’s seen at least a five percent increase in door traffic over the last year. Folks aren’t necessarily visiting to see the library’s new look: They’re much more interested in getting help with job searching and saving money.

“Hampton isn’t a wealthy community,” Carpenter says. “Some people don’t have a computer at home. If they’ve been laid off and can’t use a computer at work anymore, they come here. We’re bridging the digital divide.”

The library director sees people writing resumes and going online to apply for jobs.

“Some employers no longer accept paper applications and resumes,” Carpenter notes.

“I know even our own city has you apply for everything online now.”

The Hampton Library director started seeing an increase in visitors about a year ago, as the word “recession” popped up more and more on the news. The number of visitors per month is about 50,000 between the main library and the three branches, a significant number considering Hampton’s population is only 140,000.

Librarians who used to be microfiche masters are now also web wizards.

"They can still help someone doing a research paper about *MacBeth*," says Carpenter. "And they can show them how to work (Microsoft) Office, get online and apply for that job."

Jim Rettig, the outgoing American Library Association (ALA) president and current University of Richmond librarian, says patrons have always flocked to libraries during recessions. What makes the phenomenon different this time is the Internet.

"In 73 percent of cities, the only place to get online for free is the library," he shares. "Sometimes, librarians are teaching skills as basic as how to use a mouse."

Rettig jokes that the newest round of "Library Love" is all he's been talking about with reporters since last August. That, and the fact that many city and state governments also love libraries, but they can't currently afford to lavish their heart's desire with money. Instead, they take away things they've gladly given in the past.

A MYSTERY: WILL THERE BE ENOUGH MONEY?

ALA's Office for Library Advocacy found some bad news when looking at national funding trends.

"At the state-funding level, the outlook was downright gloomy," writes ALA Public Information Officer Jennifer Petersen in a press release.

She noted that 40 percent of states faced declining state funding for public libraries in fiscal year 2009, and 20 percent of those states believed more cuts were on the way. And the Southeast has been the hardest hit.

Hampton Roads' libraries were in the middle of the budget approval process as this issue of *Hampton Roads Magazine* went to press, and while the final chapter hadn't been proofed, the ending

didn't look to be a happy one. Norfolk Director of Libraries Norman Maas expected his budget to drop by \$145,103 to \$8,543,597—a 17 percent decrease.

Last fiscal year, he had eight full-time and 52 part-time positions vacant. The timing of a hiring freeze couldn't have been worse.

Patronage at Norfolk's 12 libraries has been steadily increasing.

In fiscal year 2004 (July 2003 through June 2004), 822,850 people visited a Norfolk library. For this past fiscal year, the library expected to welcome about 1 million visitors. That number would probably have been even higher if the main library's book collection had been available from December to March, when it was being relocated.

Computers and the World Wide Web drove the increase. In fiscal year 2007, public computer usage totaled 208,535 hours at the Norfolk libraries. For this past fiscal year ending in July 2009, officials expected the final number to jump to 460,000 hours. Good thing that the Norfolk libraries increased public computers from 214 to 387 during the last two years.

Four years ago, library officials conducted focus groups and asked what people wanted from the library. You've already guessed the answer, right? What officials didn't guess at the time was that more people coming into the library for computers would also mean more people borrowing materials.

Call it impulse borrowing. "Our circulation jumped 30 to 40 percent," says Maas.

The other day he watched a woman carry out 16 books from a branch location.

"She told me she needed me to keep on buying books," says Maas. "I told her I was well aware of that."

Fortunately, the director experienced only a small materials budget cut last year. It totaled about \$8,000, less



Marcy Sims, director of the Virginia Beach libraries, is considering a \$40 fee for non-residents to borrow materials in order to help her budget

than 1 percent of the overall materials budget.

Unfortunately, the barely noticeable cut was possible only because deep cuts were made elsewhere.

"We have job openings at every level and every branch," says Maas.

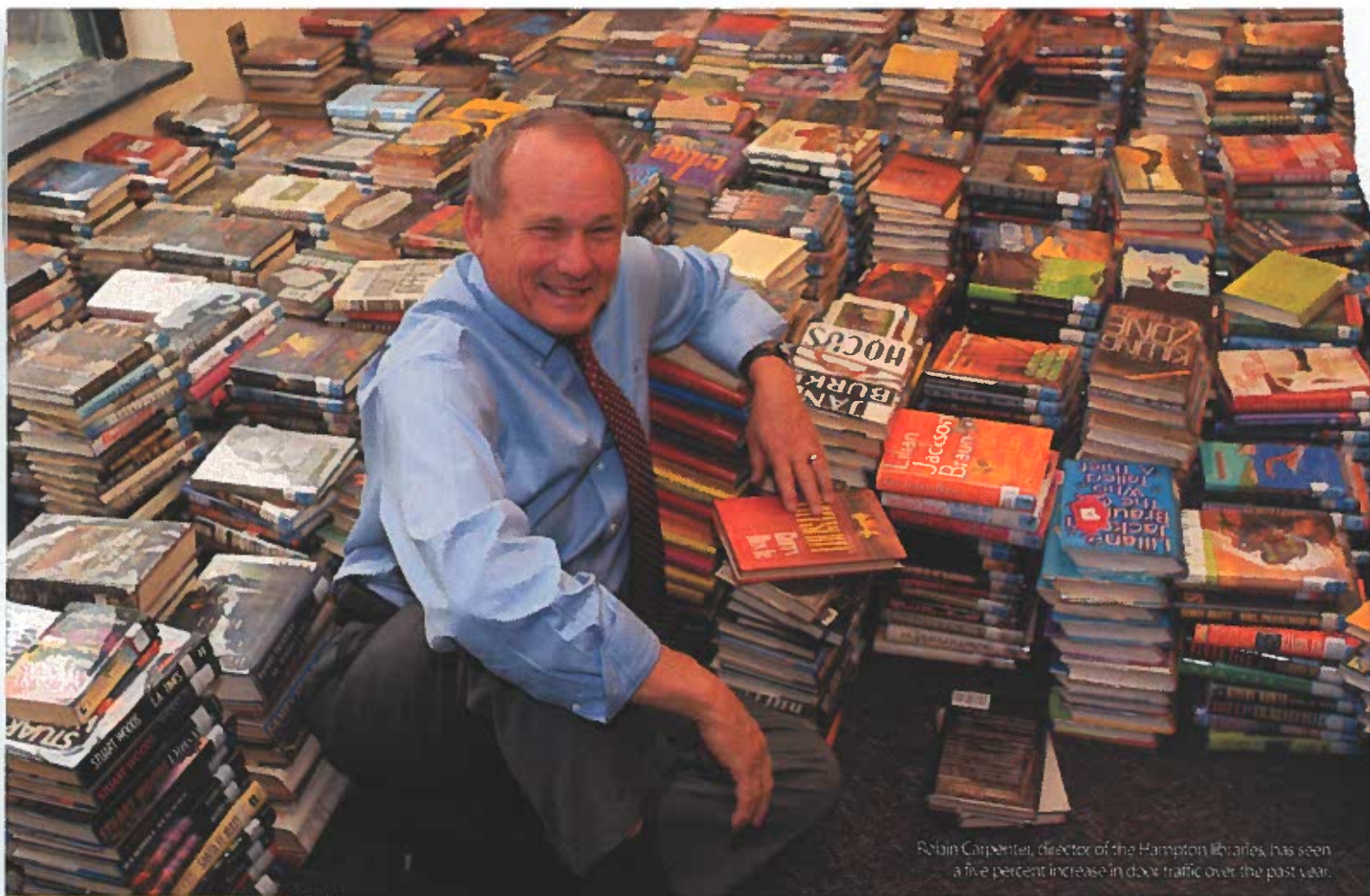
Those who remain on staff have their hands full. Maas believes they keep their spirits up despite feeling some stress, knowing that their abilities to guide a patron to a job-hunting book or an employer's web site is much appreciated. They can also be grateful for the fact that the city didn't layoff employees. (Maas notes that city employees did, however, take a 1 percent pay cut.) And soon, Maas thinks he can begin filling many of those open positions. If the budget he last saw was approved, most of the positions that were open would be refunded. The bad news, though: Some city positions were "perma-

nently frozen." Maas doesn't want to say it; he refuses to whine. But that translates to "eliminated." He'll lose three full-time positions that were vacant: Two children specialists and a staffer to work the Treasure Truck, which gave away free books to children.

"Revenues are lower for the city because of lower taxes due to lower home values, so things get cut. We'll park the truck for now," says Maas. "They can still get books at the library, and we've kept the hours in our library branches so that we stay open. That's the most important thing: To be open. I think we've prioritized right."

STOCKING UP ON BESTSELLERS

Betsy Fowler has had to balance wants versus needs as well. She accepted her job as Chesapeake director of library and research services in October 2008, after the fiscal year 2008–2009 budget



Robin Carpenter, director of the Hampton libraries, has seen a five percent increase in book traffic over the past year.

was established—and her material budget was cut by \$266,000.

Funding for part-time positions got chopped by \$78,500 and then a hiring freeze was enacted, saving \$408,000. Also cut: Contractual services—\$45,000; State aid—\$13,636; Law library—\$12,000.

Cuts for the coming fiscal year weren't looking good this spring: The materials budget was set to drop another \$50,000; and four full-time, unfilled librarian and 15 part-time, unfilled aide positions were to be eliminated.

The only number going up: Patronage. In February 2008, about 114,000 residents visited Chesapeake libraries. In February 2009, 132,000 did—nearly a 16 percent increase. At some branches, circulation has been up as much as 60 percent.

Decreased tax revenues from homes and cars and the city's need to consider a recycling fee have gobbled

up Fowler's library money, and she's left with her own creativity to keep visitors happy and educated. She's eliminated some hard-cover references that are available online; streamlined the book acquisition process; cross-trained librarians, and instituted self-checkouts at select branches.

"This is our chance to look at what makes sense," says Fowler.

Near the top of the list: Buying more in-demand items. Chesapeake's central library will always have a strong research focus, says Fowler, while the branches are driven by other factors.

"People there mainly look for bestsellers, children's books, and how-tos," she notes. "We follow what people want."

Chesapeake doesn't track individuals' reading habits or attach names to any reports, but it does analyze what visitors are reading. Fowler has seen a big spike in how-to books since the start of

the recession. People want to plant vegetable gardens, repair their lawn mowers and cook at home more, and Fowler says it only makes sense to buy these types of books so visitors find what they need.

And similar to the other cities' libraries, visitors also want help finding jobs. Chesapeake librarians were already trained to help patrons before the recession, and they're now partnering with Opportunity, Inc. to offer SNAP (Shared Network Access Point), through which job seekers can access Virginia Employment Commission and others' job listings. Librarians have also been taught to refer people to educational training. The Cuffee branch is even looking at offering Tidewater Community College classes.

"We want people who are a little hesitant to start college, for whatever reason, to do so in a space they might already know and feel comfortable in and can get to easily,"

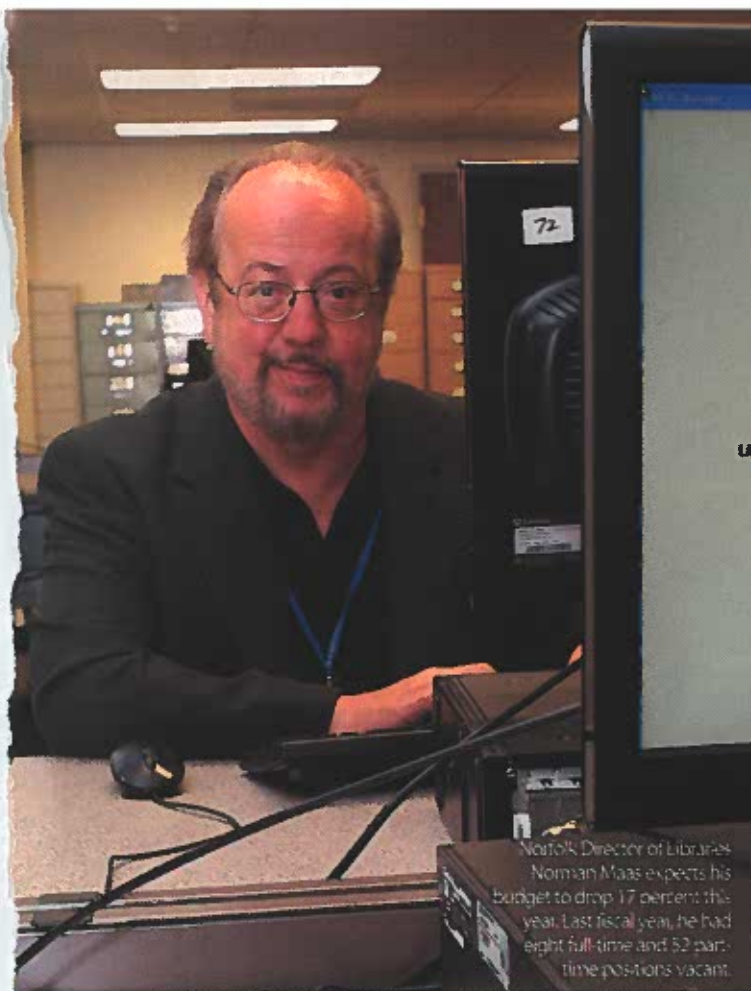
explains Fowler.

Comfort in libraries is a big theme these days as they have become gathering places as well as resource centers. Fowler rearranged furniture and shelving in her South Norfolk branch this spring to make everything more browser friendly. She, staffers and volunteers took away items that patrons weren't using to make room for more seats and an area with children's development toys and books. She added some books and computers, too.

Fowler plans to implement similar changes at all of the city's branches over the next few years, as much as her financial resources allow.

EARNING GOOD REVIEWS

Virginia Beach libraries have been lucky in that the city hasn't instituted a hiring freeze, says Library Director Marcy Simms. Yet she does have 15 job vacancies that she hasn't exactly filled. While the Kempsville branch



Norfolk Director of Libraries Norman Maas expects his budget to drop 17 percent this year. Last fiscal year, he had eight full-time and 52 part-time positions vacant.

is being renovated, some Kempsville staff members have worked at the temporary "Kempsville Express Library" at Fairfield Shopping Center and others have filled in for one-time staffers who left, saving the expense of another salary. Once the Kempsville library reopens in September, Simms would love to fill all of her openings. Final budget numbers were still under consideration as she looked at the figures this spring, but she anticipated her \$16.5 million budget being cut by 2 percent. The year before, she had a 1.2 percent cut.

Like everywhere else, the money decreases but the number of visitors increases. Virginia Beach's libraries have been swamped, with patronage increasing between 17 to 20 percent this past year. Small tweaks make it possible for Simms to keep service strong. She is relocating a research library for city staffers from the Municipal Center to the Meyera E.

Oberndorf (Central) Library and considering a \$40 fee for non-residents to borrow materials.

"Thirty-two percent of Virginia's libraries charge non-residents a fee. Chesapeake charges \$35. We're proposing \$40; we've found that we require \$38 for every Virginia Beach citizen (taken from the city taxes; not collected separately) to run the library," Simms explains.

Approximately 12,000 patrons, about five percent of the annual total, are non-residents. Simms would put the income toward her materials budget. She's also joined forces with Tidewater Community College to build a super library for students and residents.

Virginia Beach will foot \$11 million of the bill and Tidewater Community College \$40 million. It should be ready in late 2011 or early 2012.

In the meantime, Simms credits her staff with keeping

their chins up and looking for ways to better patrons' lives, even if they don't have all the resources they'd like.

"They're suggesting ideas, like offering computer and online research classes in Spanish," she shares.

Simms, and all the library directors, have the right attitude. Budgets in Hampton Roads are going down, but good news—like Virginia Beach's new library with TCC, Hampton's \$1 million renovation and Norfolk's new main library that's underway—still exists. And it's possible that a somewhat positive national trend just hasn't hit this region yet.

The American Library Association found that while some localities are experiencing budget cuts, that's

not the case everywhere. Averaging responses from a survey, the ALA concluded that library budgets overall throughout the country are going up about two percent this year. While that's not a match for double-digit increases in patrons, it is a step in the keep-libraries-strong direction. Doing so apparently benefits everyone from jobseekers to people who haven't even stepped inside a library but still need a strong economy. According to the ALA, a study commissioned by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction stated that "the return on investment in library services is \$4.06 for each dollar of taxpayer investment." **HAM**



Betsy Fowler, Chesapeake director of library and research services, says more and more of her patrons want help finding jobs.