

## Guest Opinions “Related” To Primary PSS Tax Measures

### June 5, 2013. By Jennifer Sherman Roberts. *You determine future of library, JoCo* (Guest Opinion)

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#### JENNIFER SHERMAN ROBERTS

In August 2007, a group of Josephine County citizens, myself included, met to discuss the fate of our closed libraries. From that meeting, Josephine Community Libraries was born.

When we reopened the libraries in 2008, we were pragmatic. We did what we had to do out of necessity: volunteers, donations, governmental partnerships, out-of-the-box thinking and, above all, compromise. What we didn't know was that we would be doing all this while the county crumbled around our feet.

We had no idea that our community would vote against a levy that would ensure an adequate public safety net. We assumed that at some time in the future, the turmoil surrounding the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, which reimbursed counties for reduced logging on federal lands, would be resolved and we could again ask the public to fund its library.

Now, after the second failure to pass a public safety levy, we are very nervous about the future of libraries in Josephine County.

Some people try to pit libraries against police. Librarians and public safety advocates know it doesn't work that way. Public services work in concert to provide a livable community. A failure for one critical public service is a failure for them all, especially at the level of dysfunction this county faces.

Our library is a community hub and a social crossroads for the free exchange of knowledge and access to information. The heroic efforts of citizens to reopen and operate all four libraries in Josephine County as a nongovernmental nonprofit over the past four years is inspiring. It is not, however, a long-term, sustainable solution.

After the first full year of nonprofit library operations in 2010, it became clear to JCL's board of directors that donations alone could not fund full-service operations. At that time, the board officially declared its support for the formation of a library district.

By almost every measure — number of hours, budget for materials, trained librarians — we trail the rest of the state woefully in levels of service. And every year, we dip into funding reserves to pay for what we can offer. Currently, our libraries are open fewer than half the number of hours they were before the countywide closure in 2007, and our new materials budget is a fraction of those in neighboring county-library systems.

Thankfully, residents who care about libraries continue to donate annually about \$210,000. Our staff also raises funds through grants and seeks alternative ways to bring in new dollars.

The library's future, just like that of the criminal justice system, is up to you. If you don't contribute, then our public services won't survive. The bottom line is this: If we want to have a community worth living in, one that attracts new business and new jobs, ensures a safety net for even its poorest and weakest citizens and provides access to the wider world through libraries and schools, we will have to pay for it.

We would be telling a different story if no one ever used the library, but that's just not true. We serve 22,000 cardholders in as many different ways as there are questions to be answered. From Internet access and computers to children's literacy programs to outreach to seniors, we support free access to information otherwise too expensive for most families. We've gone from zero to 22,000 customers in four years — that's a robust local business by anyone's definition.

We don't like to picture our community without public services like libraries or prosecutors and a jail, but we are dangerously close to that future. And if we can no longer recruit people and businesses to relocate here, if families move away to live someplace safer, if parents stop sharing books with their children, if the crime rate continues to rise, then our little community will become too grim to imagine.

Josephine Community Libraries is a bridge. What we've done and continue to do is incredibly inspiring, but it's not a long-term solution. Our libraries exist within the context of our community, and right now, that community is in crisis.

We will never apologize for seeking long-term, sustainable funding for our public libraries. The library volunteers who donate more than 27,000 hours of labor a year inspire all of us. They give me hope, even when I'm exhausted by the naysayers. But when will we, as a community, step up to relieve them of this burden of providing public services for free? What will it take to inspire everyone to contribute?

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Jennifer Sherman Roberts is board president of Josephine Community Libraries. People can get more information about JCL or make a donation by visiting [www.josephinelibrary.org](http://www.josephinelibrary.org) or calling 541-476-0571.