

# **Kalamazoo Public Library Bookmobile Service Report**

October 26, 2009

## **INTRODUCTION**

KPL has provided bookmobile service to our patrons for several decades. Bookmobile service here, as in most communities, has been a beloved service because it is so personal and convenient. Although generally not a service found in communities of our size, we have been fortunate to have the resources to be able to offer it in addition to a central library and four branches.

Popular materials for all ages have always been the primary items on the vehicle. Over the years, the service has responded to the community: stops have been adjusted to fit changing demographics, schools without libraries have sometimes been served, and senior residences have often been an emphasis.

We know that many bookmobile patrons use other locations in addition to visiting the bookmobile. Most bookmobile patrons would be able to visit central or a branch library, even if they currently use only the bookmobile.

In the past, when we needed to replace the vehicle to continue service, we were able to do so. That was our intention with the current vehicle but we have not been able to save at the necessary rate to plan for a replacement and do not expect to be able to do so in the foreseeable future. Although we have set aside a total of \$125,000 over the past several years, the cost of a comparable vehicle would be in the \$250,000 - \$300,000 range.

Simultaneously, decreasing revenues have forced us to begin the examination of all services and has led to the conclusion that we should not and cannot continue bookmobile service.

## **LITERATURE SEARCH FOR NATIONAL STANDARDS / TRENDS**

We conducted a literature search, hoping to find some national standards that would relate the viability of bookmobile service to the size of a library's service area and the availability of branch libraries therein. Indeed there are standards and guidelines suggested by the American Library Association, but they are limited to vehicle specifications, staffing requirements and advice about service delivery. No mention was found of conditions that should be present to justify mobile services or lead a library to acquire a bookmobile and establish bookmobile services.

Through a variety of articles, we discovered three trends. First, bookmobile services that are still flourishing are most often covering significant distances, i.e. county systems and/or rural communities. Second, urban libraries with bookmobiles have most often focused their outreach services on underserved patrons who are not mobile, or special populations unlikely to visit branch libraries. Third, some libraries are discontinuing bookmobile services due to budget constraints.

In most cases, officials who made the decision to give up bookmobile service did so with a heavy heart. Bookmobile service is typically beloved by patrons and staff alike. The cases we studied indicated the decision was difficult, but necessary. Some reasons for libraries across the country giving up bookmobile services included:

- Services to homebound and handicapped library users could be served most cost-effectively through other means.
- Bookmobile services, based on cost effectiveness, couldn't pass the test.
- A library would need to close three of the four evenings it is open to save the same amount of money as discontinuing the bookmobile.
- Keeping doors open and lights on have to come first.
- The decision is totally financial; library officials would like someone to save the bookmobile.
- The bookmobile went to the bottom of the list when commissioners prioritized all the services offered.
- Of all things the library does, the bookmobile would be the one that could be eliminated with the least detriment to the public.

## **COMPARISON WITH OTHER LIBRARIES**

Libraries that still provide bookmobile service serve a geographical area significantly larger than ours, often a county system with rural areas and 100's of square miles. Many residents have a long drive to a library building.

Bookmobiles are no longer common for public libraries, especially those like KPL, which serve only an urban area. Urban libraries have dropped bookmobile service many years ago because of the duplication of services. Services available on the bookmobile are more efficiently delivered from library buildings – central and branches where many other services not provided by bookmobiles can also be offered.

We estimate our geographical service area at 71 square miles. Even having a central library and four branches is generous coverage for a library district of our size.

**Chart #1** shows there is no other library in the country similar in geographical size and population served that provides as many service outlets as KPL. This reinforces that libraries serving urban areas similar in size to our service area have neither as many branches as KPL nor a bookmobile in addition.

Library	Sq Miles in Service Area	Population	Branches	Bookmobiles
Richmond (CA)	55	103,638	2	1
Hayword (CA)	56	149,205	1	0
Gail Borden (IL)	60	133,956	0	0
Lincoln (IL)	62	111,454	2	0
Cedar Rapids	64	126,396	1	0
Clinton - Macomb (MI)	65	141,536	2	0
Bethlehem (PA)	66	118,458	1	1
KPL	71	119,517	4	1
Denton (TX)	87	115,506	2	0

**Chart #2** compares us to other Class 6, that is, similar size libraries by population served, in Michigan. Traverse City and Willard (Battle Creek) did not participate in the survey, but Willard has a central library, one branch, and a bookmobile that is in use about half time. They may be phasing out their bookmobile service soon.

Since this data was compiled for the national survey, we have learned Flint Public Library has dropped bookmobile service. Their 16 year old vehicle had major mechanical problems this summer. They could not afford the repairs or a replacement so the service ended abruptly. A spokesperson told us that had the service not ended for mechanical problems, it would be ending this year for financial reasons.

Library	Sq Miles in Service Area	Population	Branches	Bookmobiles
Ann Arbor Capital Area	28	155,611	4	0
Detroit	140	951,270	23	2
Flint	34	124,943	3	1*
Grand Rapids	45	197,800	7	0
Herrick	220	102,212	1	0
Jackson Kent District	707	163,006	12	0
Saginaw Traverse City	157	131,833	4	0
Willard	n/a			
KPL	71	119,517	4	1

\* Bookmobile service dropped in summer 2009.

**Chart #3** shows there are just two other libraries in the country with a central library, four branches, and a bookmobile. Both serve a geographical area much larger than ours.

Library	Sq Miles in Service Area	Population
Davidson Co (NC)	548	147,269
Steele (NY)	480	91,070

Source for all three charts: Public Library Data Service Statistical Report 2009, published by PLA

## **FINANCIAL REVIEW**

KPL has been fortunate to be well supported by our taxpayers over the years. Our tax base has grown at a healthy rate and we have been able to provide many services, such as the bookmobile, that many libraries in similar size communities have not been able to afford. Other funding sources have been relatively modest, but historically stable.

That has and continues to change. For this current year, our revenues are estimated to be down 1.7%. Looking ahead to the year that will begin July 1, 2010, we expect a decrease of 5% in our revenue, including a continuation of declining penal fine revenues and the likely elimination of state aid. This will require a reduction in our expenditures of about \$550,000.

Not surprisingly, most public libraries are experiencing a reduction in revenues and are reducing services. Those similar to us in population, budget and geographic area have previously dropped bookmobile service. They are now closing branches, reducing hours, not filling position vacancies, reducing materials and programming budgets.

The annual cost to operate the bookmobile is about \$195,000 including staff salaries, fringe benefits, materials, oil and gas, repairs, and various supplies. Salaries and benefits at approximately \$152,000 is the largest component.

If the decision to end the service by the end of this fiscal year, June 30, 2010, is made at this time, there would be some modest savings of about \$10,000 from materials for the remainder of this year with more significant savings for 2010 / 2011.

## **NEXT STEPS**

If a decision is made now to end the service this fiscal year, we would begin immediately to trim some expenses for the remainder of this fiscal year. Periodical subscriptions would not be renewed – we would no longer have current magazines on the bookmobile as subscriptions expire. We would begin integrating the bookmobile book collection into other collections, and end the purchase of new materials just for the vehicle; new titles would be used from other branch and central library collections to meet bookmobile needs.

Our Marketing and Communications Department would begin the public relations campaign to notify bookmobile patrons, explain why the service is ending, and encourage them to use other locations. Other means, such as LINK, would also be used to notify patrons.

Most importantly, we would begin planning for alternate service to those bookmobile patrons who cannot visit one of our buildings. The bookmobile staff estimates there are 68-80 current users who could not travel elsewhere. Although the bookmobile staff would like to institute home visits to these patrons through a newly created "Community Outreach Services Department" we do not have the financial resources at this time to add that service.

We do have well-developed outreach services for deposit collections and Via Mail (books-by-mail) through our Patron Services Department. Adding some of the bookmobile patrons to Via Mail could double the use of that service. We would look for efficiencies in the operation and likely shift some staff there. The service would be actively promoted to bookmobile patrons.

As the bookmobile service would wind down, we would hope to find job placements for the staff. There are 2.5 staff positions, all of whom also work some time at Oshtemo Branch. Some portion of the bookmobile staff would need to remain at Oshtemo; some could be needed to help with Via Mail or deposit collections. It is hoped we would have vacancies elsewhere in the library so the remaining bookmobile staff can be assigned to other services. As opportunities to move the staff occur, the service would gradually decrease as staff members would move to other positions, and bookmobile service would gradually decrease. A long lead time would allow us to plan in this regard.

Finally the vehicle itself and the small savings we have set aside: I have no idea what the market might be for a used bookmobile of this size and age. We would advertise and hopefully sell it. I would recommend proceeds be used to help fund our CIP needs. Likewise I would recommend the \$125,000 in savings remain in the CIP and be reallocated as part of the budget process for 2010/2011.

## **SUMMARY**

Bookmobile service has been a beloved service at KPL, but it is not an essential service. As shown in the attached charts, bookmobiles are not common in public libraries similar in size and nature to us. Bookmobile services are duplicated at central and branches. Continuing to fund this service in these tight financial times would compromise our options for other services which are unique and not duplicated elsewhere in our system.

Eliminating the bookmobile service does not, unfortunately, preclude the need for additional service reductions, but a long lead time does give us time for careful planning. It is clear that economies throughout the library will continue to be required to meet the revenue shortfalls that are coming.