

**The Riverside County Library System:
Thirteen Years of Innovation, Experimentation, and Progress**

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Introduction and Celebration

The following is an excerpt of a conversation overheard recently at our Palm Desert Library.

A man speaking to his wife, "I guess there isn't much point to libraries anymore when everything is on the Internet."

Her response: "Oh, no, these libraries are busier than ever. You should see this library—there is tons of people here every day. And the La Quinta Library? You can barely find a place to sit, there are so many people there!"

We hear repeatedly how libraries are more important—and more used—now than ever, in a time when resources of all types, public and private, are being stretched to meet demand. Indeed, in response to that stretching, more than 2400 libraries nationwide have cut back their hours; many have had to close entirely.

In stark contrast to such sad statistics, our library hours, programming, and materials here in Riverside County have increased. Additionally, our efforts have been lauded—here in California and by national organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how we've arrived at this momentous point.

An Important Management Difference

A mid-1990s state-mandated proposition in California shifted property taxes to education, resulting in a dramatic reduction in library funding. Riverside County's Board of Supervisors and County staff recognized they could no longer afford status-quo operations and defined a way to manage this precious public asset—our community's libraries—with the discipline and analysis more typically found in private organizations. We established a public-private partnership that could yield increased services within the available funding.

The public libraries in Riverside County are funded by a 1.15% ad valorem property tax dedicated to the library. In the 13-years of this public-private partnership, we have not had to seek an increase in this percentage rate. Rather, as new development came to the County and as property values increased, the value of this 1.15% allocation grew accordingly. However, the County Supervisors had the foresight to regularly earmark a portion of this revenue to build an unrecognized fund balance dedicated for library funding, exclusively. Monies from this budget have only been spent on an as-needed basis to balance the budget. Over time, a library reserve budget was built by conservatively budgeting revenues and by not increasing expenses. This is an enviable financial situation that never existed under the previous contractual arrangement with the City of Riverside which managed the County's libraries for 85-years.

Under the strict terms of this new partnership agreement, we also gained more control over the services and usage of monies that voters and the County’s municipal partners demand and deserve. The results of this agreement were soon visible and dramatic, as described later in this document. During the 13 years of the partnership:

- Supplemental funding of approximately \$5 million in grant money has been secured by our private partner, thereby greatly enhancing what we can accomplish over and above what tax revenues can support.
- Extra expertise—in technology, fund-raising, and community outreach--has been brought to bear on our library operations through talents available elsewhere in our partner’s network of other libraries that are operated through similar public-private partnership models which now total 64 public library facilities nationwide.
- Support services provided by our partner, including accounting, automation support, training, and human resources, have been consolidated, resulting in far less overhead.

Understandably, in the years since their initial decision, our County Board of Supervisors has twice unanimously voted to extend this public-private partnership agreement for additional 5-year periods.

Specific Steps in Creating the Partnership

In 1997, we solicited bids by using a standard procurement process for the County. We prepared and issued a Request for Proposals that stated in no uncertain terms what we wanted to contract for and how we would judge proposals. One of our primary objectives was to regain local control over setting library policies. We insisted in the RFP that it was part of our “zero-based” planning and restructuring; that is, reforms would be required for the entire endeavor, not just working with “new money” or tinkering around the edges. We asked prospective respondents to give us “out-of-the-box” proposals for providing “traditional” public library services in a non-traditional way. In addition, we were careful to ensure that:

- We would receive the highest levels of service within the County’s dedicated funding for libraries, not just accept the lowest bid.
- We would draw on expertise from the California State Library in a consulting role, evaluating proposals.
- We would meet company representatives in person before any selection so we could ask questions on the spot and assess their motivation and decision-making.

We received proposals from three sources – the Riverside County Office of Education, the San Bernardino County Library and Library Systems & Services, LLC (LSSI). The contract was awarded to LSSI, a private library management company headquartered in Germantown, Maryland, with West Coast offices established here in Riverside County to facilitate a close relationship with us. We became the first local government organization in the United States to outsource the management of day-to-day library operations to a private company. We are, therefore, a public institution with a private partner; our partnership is structured to assign to each partner the functions that it does best.

Important Early Steps

Public entities have long incorporated different employment models for library staff in different roles. They draw at times on part-timers, temporaries, substitutes, volunteers, contractor technical staff, and interns as well as full-time professional staff. The Riverside County public-private partnership model added to this array another paradigm for the organizational environment of public libraries: the employment of formerly public employees by a private company. This removed some expensive aspects of their employment from our budget, but we had structured the contract to make sure we still had a voice in the hiring of key library management positions.

LSSI offered employment to all existing library staff. The new LSSI employees received the same rate of base pay, accumulated vacation time and vacation accrual rates. Their prior investment in the California Public Employees' Retirement System (CalPERS) was protected. They also became eligible for Social Security for the first time and they were given the option of participating in their new employer's 401-K plan and other LSSI employee benefits.

They also became part of a merit-based, results-oriented awards system for salary increases and promotion. The arrangement has proven satisfactory for most: many of those incumbent employees are still working within our system; more than fifty received 10-year service awards from LSSI in 2008; and currently, Riverside County, through LSSI, is providing employment for 214 professional librarians and paraprofessionals.

Another innovation was the establishment of regions or zones within our large county so our citizens receive the best services and materials regardless of where they live. Here's how we have benefited from that:

- We are able to establish operational procedures that allow the local libraries to work more cohesively because of their proximity.
- Regional policies and shared services in zones can better reflect the needs and culture of these smaller "slices" of the County.
- Funding for the libraries is fairer because each zone has its own library usage and property tax figures.
- Patrons in each zone have access to their own Principal Reference Center with specialists and select materials instead of relying solely on one reference collection at a central library.

Immediate Results

Within the first year of this partnership we saw significant improvements:

- A \$900,000 decrease in operations costs;
- A doubling in our materials budget which has since grown approximately ten-fold to almost \$2 million annually;
- 34% increase (on average) in expanded library operating hours (which have now more than doubled);
- 15% increase in circulation of our materials;
- More programming relative to the needs of each community, resulting in greater participation at library-sponsored events;
- Saved people's jobs, avoiding the possibility they might have to relocate in order to continue working as librarians, or start entirely new careers.

These accomplishments were immediately noted and enjoyed by our citizens and others. We even received a national award from the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships.

5 Years Later -- Impressive Improvements

Within just the first five years of this partnership—without changing the library's funding sources, increasing taxes, or imposing usage fees—we had accomplished:

- 86% increase in operating hours, system-wide, including popular, new Sunday hours;
- Doubling of staffing, including the influx of more master's degree-level staff;
- Continued expansion of the materials budget;
- 10% increase in circulation of our materials;
- Significant technology upgrades including:
 - Addition of more than 200 new public-access internet terminals;
 - Installation of a \$140,000 computer system for staff usage to better track collection items for our patrons and to contain operating costs;
 - Upgrade to high-speed Internet access in our facilities;
- Access to far more materials for our patrons because of more far-reaching delivery of materials among our facilities;
- Doubling of mobile library service throughout the county;
- Construction of new library buildings and renovations to existing properties
- Established a new joint use library facility with the Perris Union High School District
- Our partner paid for an independent financial audit, by an outside firm, for improved transparency and accountability of public dollars for our citizens.

All of this, and more, was accomplished during the first five years of this public-private partnership.

13 Years Later

Since Riverside County began operating its libraries under this innovative business model, the County has realized extraordinary management efficiencies:

- Reclaimed control over our public libraries. The County became more accountable for how millions of taxpayer dollars were being spent;
- Completed 20 construction projects, including 11 replacement facilities and 9 entirely new libraries, as well as 7 major library renovations ;
- Introduced an early childhood literacy program that has helped over 15,000 children enter school reading or ready to read since 2002;
- Created an English as a Second Language program that has helped thousands of adults learn to speak, read and write English;
- Launched an award-winning Latino outreach program called Leer Es Triunfar (Reading Is Succeeding) and become a best-practice example in the state of California for such programs as Día de los Niños/ Día de los Libros;
- Initiated and continues to operate six joint-use library facilities shared with local school districts;
- Installed a Radio Frequency-Identification (RFID) self-service system in many facilities, so people can check out their own materials, speeding up that process and also preventing theft of materials;
- Introduced a new web site providing 24/7 access to reference services, databases, interactive programs, staff blogs, and a chance to comment and interact with others around topics and areas of interest. Users can also request RSS feeds sent to their e-mail, and interact with library staff and services online;
- Installed a new print-on-demand system with a \$100,000 grant from the State of California so patrons can print, cover, and bind books from computer files. The service is free if patrons return the book to the library's collection after they read it; as an option, they can elect to keep the book and pay a small fee;
- Saved people's jobs, avoiding the possibility they might have to relocate in order to continue working as librarians, or start entirely new careers.
- We created more than 100 new jobs

Recognition

The U.S. Green Building Council has recognized us for the first county-owned environmentally friendly building: our LEED-certified Woodcrest Library uses about 22,000 kilowatt hours less electricity in a year than comparable-size branches even though it is open more hours. (And this saves the County about \$2,100/year.)

Riverside and San Bernardino Counties received \$250,000 in grant funding to create a combined automated system that allows residents in both counties access to the combined collections of both libraries.

In 2005, the American Library Association awarded Riverside County Library System the prestigious John Cotton Dana Award for its Latino outreach program Leer Es Triunfar (Reading Is Succeeding).

In 2008, RCLS was awarded the Raúl and Estela Mora Award for its exemplary Día de los Niños/Día de los Libros (Day of the Child/Day of the Book) celebrations and for leading efforts to have the State Library of California adopt the promotion of statewide “Día” celebration.

California’s Council on the Humanities chose the Riverside County Library System to be its sole partner for its “Making a Difference” programs promoting civic engagement in libraries.

The Association of Library Services to Children, a division of the American Library Association, selected the Riverside County Library System to host the 2010 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, only the fourth time in 40 years that this prestigious event has been held in California.

Summary Statistics

	1997	2010
Facilities	24	33
Hours open per week	612	1,343
Circulation	1.9 million*	3.4 million
Number staff (FTE)	125	214
Number MLS (FTE)	20	33
Book budget	\$180,000	\$2,600,000
Annual visits	1.9 million	3.1 million
Program attendance	20,844	127,717
Adult program attendance	1,082	61,204
New formats		More in Spanish; More “play-aways”; Print-on-Demand
New technology		RFID, advanced web capabilities
New financial accountability		Outside independent audit

**Circulation for 1999-2000 (previous year’s circulation figures included in-house use)*

These statistics indicate that the steady improvements in library facilities and collections, together with the introduction of innovative services and programs, is beginning to yield significant increases in public use of the library system and its resources. Circulation in the last three years has increased over 70% and attendance at RCLS programs has increased 150% in the same period. The increases shown above in attendance at programs from 1997-98 to 2008-09, including an astounding increase in adult attendance from just over 1,000 to over 61,000 last year, reflect our attempt to create dynamic and exciting programs and services for all ages.

Summary: Delivering Important Results

The end of the first decade of the 21st Century and the start of the second decade will be remembered worldwide in government circles and with taxpayers as a time of high budget deficits, staff and service cutbacks, coupled with challenging, creative and sometimes painfully-contortionist financial juggling.

According to the American Library Association, nationwide, the average per capita operating expenditure for public libraries was \$34.95 in 2007 (the most recent information available). We have been able to give our citizens more library benefits than ever before, but at roughly half that amount of funding. Riverside County has built a modern 21st century public library system that is award-winning and the innovator of new services and technologies to serve our citizens better, year in and year out.

ADDENDUM

Significant Infrastructure Projects since start of Public-Private Partnership

New Buildings in a New Service Location (10)

- Eastvale: school joint use
- El Cerrito: school joint use
- Home Gardens
- Lakeside: school joint use
- Mead Valley (status: design phase)
- Mission Trail
- Paloma Valley: school joint use
- Romoland: school joint use
- Temecula City Library
- Woodcrest (TEMPORARY store front)

New Buildings to Replace Existing Libraries (11)

- Anza
- Calimesa
- Canyon Lake
- Highgrove (under construction)
- La Quinta: 10,000 sq. ft.
- Mecca
- Robidoux
- San Jacinto – school joint use
- Sun City
- Thousand Palms
- Woodcrest – First LEED Certified building in Riverside County

Renovations/Expansions of Existing Libraries (8)

- Highgrove
- Valle Vista
- La Quinta expansion: expanded to 20,000 sq. ft.
- Cathedral City
- Palm Desert (design phase)
- Canyon Lake expansion
- Home Gardens expansion
- Grace Mellman

Bookmobiles

- Coachella Valley Bookmobile – replacement
- Western County Bookmobile – replacement
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