



**Community Services Committee
Research Report**

March 17, 2010

Overview

As part of their deliberation, the Community Services Committee of Engage Gwinnett has asked several questions regarding parks and libraries. Specifically, they have asked the following questions:

1. What efforts have the three comparison communities made to address needs in areas identified as underserved for parks, recreation, and/or library services?
2. What opportunities might there be for stimulus funding?
3. Are there any public libraries that have been privatized in the U.S., and if so, how has it worked out?

These questions were passed on to the School of Business at Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) and Gwinnett County's Economic Analysis Division. Given the short timeframe and lack of a budget, the amount of formal research that could be conducted was extremely limited. However, the answers provided here should be sufficient to meet the needs of the committee.

Efforts Made to Address Needs in Areas Identified as Underserved

It is important to note that what constitutes "underserved" varies greatly between each of these communities. For some, it is a spot on the map. For others, it is a specific population or demographic group. Given these differences, it is difficult to directly compare the three communities and the level of government involvement in the service.

Anne Arundel County, MD

Parks and Recreation: No additional efforts are being made to accommodate underserved areas due to budgetary constraints. The department is instead beginning to lease property to service providers to offer programs they can no longer afford to provide.

Library Services: The Anne Arundel County Library System does very little outreach programming due to low staff numbers and budgetary constraints which have impacted library hours, and caused a reduction in collections and popular programs. Library programming, such as special events and library story-times, varies to allow each branch to meet the needs that the specific area.

Cobb County, GA

Parks and Recreation: Cobb County voters approved issuing a \$40 million bond to purchase much-needed park land in 2006. Since then, over 300 acres of land has been acquired. The department used recommendations from a citizen advisory group to determine which properties to purchase. Cobb County's master plan, which public input helped to develop, calls for 10.5 acres of park space per 1,000 residents.

Library Services: The Cobb County Library System looks for opportunities to partner with other local groups to provide programming for underserved populations. In order to help meet the needs of a growing elderly population, the library partners with Cobb Senior Services by providing books to recipients of the Meals on Wheels program. They also partner with the Cobb Literacy Council to reach out to people studying for the GED. Surveys are used to help determine which services to provide. Community planning and development, access to public transportation, and focus groups are used in deciding when and where to open new branches.

San Mateo County, CA

Parks and Recreation: Since the parks and recreation department does not currently offer any programming, they are pursuing a joint endeavor with cities, which do offer programming, for added services. The department was a partner in a youth outreach program, Green Force Conservation Crews, which allowed several high-school aged students to participate in park improvements. Public input is sought when considering land acquisition, as well as in their master plan.

Library Services: The target areas for the San Mateo County Library System are low income citizens and the unemployed. The library offers many different types of outreach programs for the underserved population such as adult and early literacy programs, book clubs, and classes for the Spanish speaking population. Library employees read to people at homeless shelters and food distribution centers, and they also participate in a youth incarceration outreach program.

Opportunities for Stimulus Funding

The Grants section within the Department of Financial Services pursued all funding available in the areas designated by the Board of Commissioners that did not produce additional operational impacts. Within the State of Georgia, Gwinnett County received the largest share of stimulus funding, a

total of almost \$120 million. In addition to available funds for Transportation Infrastructure, Water Infrastructure, Police/Fire, and Community/Economic Development, \$7.3 million was allocated for Energy Efficiency and Conservation. The Department of Community Services (DoCS), as well as other departments, will benefit from this funding through the resulting energy audits and energy efficiency retrofits that are being planned.

This past year, DoCS participated in the ARC Summer Employment Program, which placed 37 people in Parks & Recreation parks and facilities throughout the county, the Gwinnett Environmental & Heritage Center, and the Lawrenceville Senior Center, at no cost to Gwinnett County. Involvement in this ARC program saved the County approximately \$76,000 in staffing costs. Additionally, in 2009 DoCS received roughly \$35,600 in grants/donations to help offset operating costs.

In summary, Gwinnett County has done an excellent job of pursuing stimulus-related funding opportunities across many operational areas.

Privatization of Public Libraries in the U.S.

The term “privatization,” as it relates to situations where a for-profit company is used to manage a public library is often a source of confusion. One reason causing the confusion is the lack of a commonly agreed upon definition, which can vary depending on the source. Because of the lack of an accepted definition in the literature, privatization is often used interchangeably with the term “outsourcing.” In an effort to distinguish the two, the American Library Association’s (ALA) Outsourcing Task Force defines privatization as the shifting of policy making and management of library services or responsibility for the performance of core library services in their entirety, from the public sector to the private sector; whereas, outsourcing is described as the contracting to external companies or organizations, functions that would otherwise be performed by library employees.¹

It is not uncommon for public libraries to outsource certain functions regardless of whether the functions are considered a “core” or “non-core.” A few communities throughout the U.S. have decided to go a step further and have contracted with a for-profit library management firm to manage the day-to-day operations of the library. Although these communities are often referred to as being “privatized,” they are still able to retain ownership of library assets, they continue to set library policy,

¹ American Library Association. 1999a. “Outsourcing and privatization in American libraries: Report of the ALA Outsourcing Task Force” 1998-99 Council Document

and they are funded, at least in part, by public dollars. In addition, current employees of the library are often given an opportunity to re-apply for their job, and if re-hired they become employees of the private company rather than remaining public employees.² In reality, these types of situations more accurately describe a private-public agreement, rather than a total privatization.

One of the largest for-profit library management firms, Library Systems & Services, LLC (LSSI), currently manages thirteen library systems across the nation, ranging from California to Kansas, to Tennessee. The pioneer of this public-private partnership was Riverside County, California, which entered into an agreement with LSSI for the day-to-day management of its 25-branch system in 1997. For this research, a couple of counties currently contracting with LSSI for library management were contacted regarding their reason for contracting and their satisfaction of service. Information for the third county, Riverside County, CA, was obtained from a study conducted in 2002 by the Florida House of Representatives Committee on Tourism.³ Reasons for contracting out services are listed below for those counties that were surveyed.

Riverside County, CA: structure; lack of control; governance; funding problems; level of service provided; 6 months to find someone to run and staff the county library system

Jackson County, OR: financial crisis; lost federally shared timber revenue (amount equal to tax base) funding; couldn't pass replacement tax, possible library district with cities failed, closed all thirteen branches for 6 months

Finney County, KS: longer term librarian retired and replacement was inexperienced -- outcome was poor; difficulty in recruiting someone to run the county library system

As it can be seen from the three examples above, there are various reasons counties choose to enter into a public-private partnership. County management for both Jackson County and Finney County were pleased with the outcome of outsourcing. The services in Finney County were overall improved and they "have never felt any pressure for an increased budget by LSSI."⁴ In Jackson County, libraries were able to re-open due to negotiating a contract for half of the original hours of operation

² Hill, Heather. "Outsourcing the Public Library: A Critical Discourse Analysis." Diss. University of Missouri, 2009. Web. 3 Mar. 2010.

³ Florida House of Representatives. *Report on Privatization of Public Libraries: Pros and Cons*. Jan. 2002. Web. 10 Mar. 2010.
<http://www.leg.state.fl.us/publications/2001/house/reports/tourism/lib_pdfs/exe_sum.pdf>.

⁴ Olson, Peter. Telephone interview. 10 Mar. 2010.

with LSSI.⁵ The Deputy County Manager for Jackson County stated that usage of library services have increased, despite the fact that not all libraries are operating at full capacity yet, and some have to stagger hours of operation between branches.⁶ According to an article published by the California Taxpayers' Association, library users detected little change when their local branches switched to the management of LSSI.⁷ Some citizens claim that the library started having better hours and more reference computers. While it certainly might not be true for all libraries that have entered into a public-private partnership, the counties that were contacted for this research are generally pleased with their experience.

In conclusion, there are a few local governments across the United States that have outsourced the management of their public library system. Despite no longer managing day-to-day operations, these communities still retain budgetary control and continue to set library policies. If using the ALA definition, it is a misnomer to say they have "privatized" their public library system. Instead, these communities have entered into a public-private partnership and have been satisfied with the results.

⁵ Eventually, the cities in Jackson County, OR also participated in funding the other half of operating hours for the libraries.

⁶ Bragg, Harvey. Telephone interview. 10 Mar. 2010.

⁷ Autman, Samuel. "Riverside County Libraries Shelve Old Ways: County Is First in the Nation to Hire A Private Firm To Manage Operations". *Cal-Tax Digest Online* Sep. 1999. California Taxpayers Association. 3 March 2010. <http://www.caltax.org/MEMBER/digest/sep99/sep99-7.htm>