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Notes from Mosier: The Road to Sustainability

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Notes from Mosier — The Road to Sustainability

Column Editor: **Scott Alan Smith** (Western Regional Manager, Midwest Library Service) <smith@midwestls.com>

In my recent columns for *ATG* I've been writing about the libraries in Curry County, Oregon, and what I believe are the steps (the first steps, at least) to ensuring their survival. These decisions are primarily political, but as is the case with so many things in life, politics play an integral part in successful library management. To frame the specifics of Curry's circumstances I'm first going to outline the general political climate in southwestern Oregon and northern California.

Curry and Jackson counties in southern Oregon, and Del Norte and Siskiyou in northern California, are remote from their respective state capitols, and all share a deep distrust of state governments and major population centers. At one point there was a fanciful movement to secede from both states and form the State of Jefferson. Even within each county there's a strong libertarian and divisive view of the world; within Curry, suggestions of cooperative ventures with Brookings or Gold Beach to the south are greeted with derision by voters in Port Orford and Langlois to the north.

Such a political climate makes it very challenging for publicly-funded agencies to effect change. Each of the five public libraries in Curry County is a Special District; i.e., each

has a publicly elected, five-member board of directors to which the library directors report. Voters in each district have the power to approve or reject any ballot measures defining tax rates or the district's formation.

I concluded some time ago, and have already written about my conviction that one of the first significant steps needed in Curry to preserve the truly excellent regional libraries in the county is the dissolution of the five independent districts and the formation of a single, county-wide district. This is not to be confused with library systems administered by county governments; this would still be a Special District, but a unified one. I do not advocate county-operated systems: when confronted with stark budget realities (as Curry is; the county is essentially bankrupt) library funding is an easy target. But consolidating many administrative functions in a central library and operating the others as branch libraries would streamline library operations and enable sustained library services to patrons throughout the county.

Such change is difficult to implement. Dissolution of existing districts and the formation of a new one requires voter approval, and that's a daunting target in a tax climate as skewed and ill-informed as encountered in Curry. My col-

league and most excellent library director **Tobe Porter**, who will retire formally in June, and her husband **John** were amazingly successful in persuading the voters of north Curry to support an initiative to create the current **Langlois Public Library**; she's planning to devote time in her retirement to promoting the formation of a north Curry district, the first step in creating a county-wide system.

Another development that I hope will play into the future success of Curry libraries is the arrival (or return) of **Jeremy Skinner**, library director at the Curry Public Library in Gold Beach. Gold Beach is the county seat, and in many ways the obvious choice of a main library, with the rest of the county libraries functioning as branches. **Jeremy** is a native of Gold Beach and hence familiar with the south coast (it can be a challenging place to live if you've never been in a fairly isolated place). He spent several years at **Lewis and Clark College** and has a strong background in cataloging and experience with systems migration, in the **Orbis Cascade** move from Millennium to **Ex Libris' Alma**. He's an exceptional leader and someone I think well placed to serve as the driving force for library services in Curry County. The process of guiding the five libraries to a more secure future will be a long one, but it's a journey I'm confident **Jeremy** can effectively manage.

Hence my decision to leave Langlois. When **Jay Askuvich**, General Sales Manager at **Midwest Library Services**, contacted me about the possibility of going to work for them, I was receptive. (This was intended to be a bit of a surprise, but thanks, **Katina**, you stole my thunder in the last issue of *ATG*!)

There were two reasons the **Midwest** offer was compelling: first, from the Langlois perspective, it would serve as a jolt to the board that change is needed. I had a great board, don't get me wrong, but the day-to-day realities of library management aren't what they're elected to confront, and the bigger picture isn't always part of their mandate. By leaving I compelled them to consider in a very visceral way what the future, and what the long-term sustainability of the community's library might look like. As I have said before, it's not the individual, it's the institution.

The second reason was **Midwest**. I've known **Jay**, and **Midwest**, for over thirty years. This was simply an opportunity I could not pass up. In a vendor world described on the one end by **Amazon** (I won't even get started) and the big-box vendors on the other, **Midwest** survives (and thrives) as a vendor with feet in two worlds: the old-school values of genuine service and personal attention (when you call you get a real person, not an automated switchboard telling you our menus have changed and we value your business, but we'll keep you on hold for ten minutes), and evolving technologies (cloud-based solutions; truly effective Web solutions). So, I've gone from vendor to librarian, back to vendor. In my next column my colleague **Steven Chase** and I will explore some notions about the state of current book vendors.

And, for those of you who may not have thought about it, this year's Acquisitions Institute at **Timberline Lodge** is coming up in May — check us out at www.acquisitionsinstitute.org. 🐾