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## Plainfield Public Library officials fear "catastrophic" cuts

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About a month after being awarded the state's highest honor in his profession, Plainfield Public Library director Joe Da Rold is concerned that the city is planning "catastrophic" cuts that he said would devastate the Park Avenue facility.

Da Rold, the 2009 state Librarian of the Year as named in May by the New Jersey Library Association, said a recent meeting with City Administrator Bibi Taylor led him to believe that the library's funding likely will be cut from its present allocation of \$1.56 million to \$1.2 million in 2010-11. According to Da Rold, that figure would force the library to close at 5 p.m. every day, close altogether on Mondays, lay off 18 of 31 employees and terminate its popular local history and literacy programs. Taylor late Monday called that notion "extremely premature," but declined to speculate on what the library's budget might be set to, stating that "there's too many unknowns at this point."

The library earlier this year absorbed budget cuts that forced it to trim its weekly hours from 61 to 54 and slash its part-time hours by 42 percent; Da Rold said that if the current budget holds, those reductions will remain in place during the fiscal year that starts next week. But Da Rold and a long list of civic leaders pleaded with the council Monday to take up their cause and restore a previous budget that fell a shade under \$2 million.

"This goes against 130 years of history, and it would have a devastating effect on our community," Da Rold said. "It would effectively destroy the library ... and the community that I know does not want to see that happen."

About a dozen people spoke in support of the library Monday, praising its efforts to maintain quality services despite facing financial challenges for years. Rebecca Williams and Jim Pivnichny, the respective Democrat and Republican candidates for a council seat up for grabs during November's general election, echoed each other's comments.

"It's a nonpartisan, nonpolitical place" at which more than 60 community groups hold meetings, Williams noted, opining that the library has "absorbed more than their fair share" of budget trimming during recent years.

"The library, in my estimation, is one of the gems of Plainfield," Pivnichny agreed. "Let's keep it the gem that it is."

Da Rold distributed to council members packages of information that appeared to present a strong case. The city's budget has increased 87.3 percent between fiscal years 1998 through 2009, going from about \$38.6 million to \$72.3 million, according to the package, while the library's budget increased 26.7 percent during that time, going from about \$1.1 million to \$1.4 million.

Despite those challenges, the library's circulation jumped 35 percent from 2008 to 2009, Da Rold said, with more than 17,000 users coming to borrow some of the facility's more than 181,000 volumes. Speakers also touted an ESL (English as a Second Language) program that serves more than 200 people from 39 countries, a service for which there is a waiting list of more than 150 people.

Da Rold said he and others also took exception to Taylor's recent statement that "the library is not a part of city government." But Taylor clarified Monday that she simply meant that the library by definition is an autonomous body that operates separately from the city despite being funded by it.

Taylor also said that Mayor Sharon Robinson-Briggs supports the library, but when asked whether its 2008-09 budget might be restored, she pointed to the cuts that took effect several months ago.

"The mayor's budget reflects the priorities of the administration," Taylor said.

Council President Annie McWilliams and other council members pledged their support for the library and promised to examine the issue closely as the budget process goes forward. The mayor did not introduce a budget until November during the last fiscal cycle.

"I'll be there tomorrow," McWilliams quipped, "to return some overdue books."

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