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## Budget cuts force Plainfield library to slash hours, staffing

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### Abstract (Summary)

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### Full Text (594 words)

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### STAFF WRITER

The Plainfield Public Library is operating with reduced hours and staffing levels in the wake of sweeping budget cuts the city recently put into effect.

The cuts pushed the library's weekly hours of operation from 61 down to 54, eliminating Thursday evening and Saturday afternoon hours that were in place up until March 6. Previously open until 9 p.m. four nights per week, the library now is open 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mondays through Wednesdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays. In addition, according to Library Director Joe Da Rold, part-time hours are being cut by 42 percent, affecting nine employees, some of whom now only will work four hours per week.

According to Da Rold, the city cut approximately \$300,000 out of the library's annual budget. Most of that was the result of two factors, Da Rold said: personnel and operations budgeting for the library was frozen despite the library employees' union contract guaranteeing a 3 percent pay increase, and the city asked the library to pay back the cost of employees' Social Security, pension and medical benefits.

"To our knowledge," Da Rold said, "no other (municipal) department has been billed for benefit reimbursement."

The budget cuts also likely will result in the loss of about \$10,000 in state aid, according to Da Rold.

"For us, that amount pays a lot of bills," he said.

Da Rold and other library employees lamented the fact that the cuts came after the library experienced record patronage in 2009. Last year saw a 30 percent increase in circulation and a surge in the number of adults using the library's public Internet access to search for jobs. English as a Second Language classes at the library also are experiencing high attendance, with more than 150 regular students.

The Park Avenue facility has 200,000 volumes and a climate-controlled historical section with a massive local history collection of out-of-print books, maps, photographs and a unique set of 15,000 architectural drawings of Plainfield buildings. The library also features an extensive art collection and photographic archives with tens of thousands of pieces.

Da Rold said he solicited suggestions from employees about how to offset the cuts, then went with the plan he felt would have the least negative impact.

"There was just no way to do this without hurting staff members and inconveniencing some our library users," Da Rold said. "The level of services will be affected, but we will not lose sight of our mission to serve and educate the community."

City Administrator Bibi Taylor defended the city's decision to cut funding, noting that the 2009-10 budget still appropriated more than \$300,000 beyond the \$1.21 million it is required by law to allocate to the library.

"The administration takes every municipal function very seriously, and we give careful consideration to all the services we provide our residents," Taylor said. "The problem is we've had to weigh many tough decisions on how to equally apportion the cutbacks across every department."

Mayor Sharon Robinson-Briggs in late 2009 introduced a \$73 million preliminary budget that included provisions for about 15 municipal layoffs. The City Council cut more than an additional \$1 million out, necessitating a second round of layoffs and driving a looming tax hike that many feared would approach double figures down to a little more than 7 percent.

"Unfortunately, we can't continue to do as much as we've always done," Taylor said. "We're cutting back in all our departments; it's unfortunate, but that's just the reality we're faced with."

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