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Downtown library reduces its hours

Libraries 1990-1999
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SANTA CRUZ — Turning another page in the state budget crisis, the Santa Cruz Public Library system announced this week that it will be trimming the operating hours of its central branch.

The downtown library will open an hour later Monday through Saturday — at 10 a.m. instead of 9 a.m. — beginning Jan. 1.

Operating hours for the nine branches in the system will not change. Currently they open at 10 a.m. — with the exception of the Felton branch, which opens at 9 a.m.

The Library Oversight Committee is reducing hours as a way to balance a budget that is more than \$118,000 in the red.

By cutting six hours a week from the main branch's schedule, juggling and delaying hiring for unfilled library jobs, and by increasing fines for overdue books and other borrower sins, the library system budget balances, at least for now, said Anne Turner, director of city-county library system.

Demand for services is up 10 percent, she said, and more cuts are on the horizon.

"This is a really only a delay of the bad news," Turner said. "The situation could be much worse next year."

Cutting hours at the beginning of the day — when use of the library is relatively light — was the least painful alternative, she said.

But in front of the central branch shortly before 9 a.m. Wednesday, news of the reduced hours was met with gasps by library users, who had gathered to

wait for the doors to open.

"Oh, dear," said Helen Schomberg of Aptos, who does volunteer work at the library for the county Genealogy Society. "It's too bad, it will be a shame. We're having to cut down on so many services, and the library is certainly well-used in this town."

Maja Smith, a 13-year-old home school student from Aptos who often uses the library as a place to study, said the reduced hours were "awful" news. Smith usually gets dropped off at the library once a week at 8:30 a.m., and her half-hour wait for the doors to open will soon grow to 90 minutes.

"I'll probably just be getting colder, sitting here in the pouring rain," she said.

The executive director of a nonprofit group that provides fund raising, advocacy and volunteer services to the library system described the reduced hours as part of a "budget nightmare..."

"We're disappointed," said Pat Sandidge of Friends of the Library. "However, we do understand."

"It's the least disruptive way of handling the cuts that have to be made, but it's not fun," said Sandidge.

Also effective the first of the year, the charge for overdue books will be increased from 20 cents to 25 cents a day. The charge for special-requesting a book, then not picking it up, will jump from \$1 to \$2.50. In addition, borrowers who owe more than \$10 will be prohibited from checking out books; previously, the credit limit was \$25, creating a wealth of "\$24.99 borrowers," said Turner.