



Bethany Bray does some research at the Sterling Library in Loudoun.  
By James A. Parcell—The Washington Post

# MIETRO

## Libraries Keep the Technology Coming While Cutting Staff and Hours, Area Systems Can't Resist Adding Expensive Equipment

By Steve Bates and Stephen Turnham  
Washington Post Staff Writers

Washington area public libraries are spending large sums on expensive, high-technology equipment at the same time they are cutting staff, resulting in a dazzling array of new services in buildings that are open less and less.

In some cases, new or renovated libraries are closed because cash-strapped governments have no money to staff the branches or put books on the shelves. At one new Fairfax County library, in Centreville, there isn't even money for shelves.

Although virtually every area library system is

feeling the budget squeeze, most are continuing to find the lure of high-tech catalogue, check-out and data research systems too great to resist. Facing the budget ax, most area libraries are cutting people, not stinting on equipment.

"It's an odd mode to be in," said Maria Pedak-Kari, spokeswoman for Montgomery County public libraries. "We're downsizing for the present but expanding for the future" by investing in technology.

The economic boom years of the 1980s corresponded with an explosion of high-tech library equipment: computers to keep track of circulating books, on-line card catalogues, even sophisticated systems that deliver whole articles from

encyclopedias and magazines at the touch of a keyboard.

Many libraries have been buying liberally. Although much high-tech equipment is designed to cut down on labor by streamlining information retrieval and circulation, the equipment also can mean high annual charges for updating, either by keyboarding information or by buying expensive disks containing the most recent information.

One data retrieval system available in several area library systems, called InfoTrac, costs more than \$100,000 to set up. It can cost at least that much annually to buy new data disks listing magazine articles, encyclopedia reports, employment

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## Amid Cuts, Libraries Go High-Tech

LIBRARIES, From D1

information about U.S. companies and a wide range of other data. Without the new disks, the system quickly loses its value.

Other data bases, such as ProQuest and Dialog, also are updated regularly, some almost daily. High-technology purchases vary across the area:

■ In Prince William County, library officials are spending \$1.9 million over several years for a computerized card catalogue that also tracks circulation throughout the county's three regional libraries and six satellite facilities.

■ Sometimes high-tech purchases cause controversy. Last week, under pressure from residents and the county's Board of Supervisors, the Loudoun Library Board scaled back by \$40,000 the planned purchase of \$110,000 worth of equipment for a public-access film production studio at a new library in Leesburg.

■ In Howard County, officials have spent about \$50,000 to build their own data research system, which can be accessed from home computers by county residents who pay a one-time \$50 fee.

Meanwhile, library staffing and hours have been reduced across the area, with Sunday service one of the primary victims. Two of nine Prince George's County branches recently eliminated Sunday hours, and the White Oak Library in Montgomery ended Sunday service last

### EXAMPLES OF CUTBACKS

■ **Arlington County main library:** The renovated and expanded building, scheduled to open next summer, may have its staffing and hours cut back drastically from original plans, officials report.

■ **Centreville Library, western Fairfax County:** Construction is nearly complete on the building, but the planned May opening also is dependent on money for shelves, according to library spokesmen.

■ **Chevy Chase Community Library:** Renovations have been completed, but the Montgomery County library system says it has no funds to staff and reopen the branch. "It's just sitting there," said spokeswoman Maria Pedak-Kari.

■ **Sherwood Regional Library, southern Fairfax:** The renovation and expansion are almost complete, county officials say, but it won't open until April. There will be no new staffing, and funds for book shelves and other supplies have not yet been approved.

■ **Prince George's County libraries** will close from Saturday to Jan. 1 because of countywide government furloughs. Montgomery libraries will be closed from Wednesday to Jan. 1 for the same reason, officials say.

■ **Prince William County:** One of two planned regional libraries opened in October near Woodbridge, but a second, to serve western Prince William, could be delayed a year under proposals now being considered, officials say.

SOURCE: Local Governments

summer, two years after it was begun.

In Montgomery and Prince George's, library workers, like many other government workers, will be sent home without pay for several days at the end of December, saving library budgets \$225,000 in Montgomery and \$200,000 in Prince George's.

Prince George's libraries will be closed from Saturday to Jan. 1 because of the furloughs. Montgomery libraries will be closed from Wednesday to Jan. 1 for the same reason, officials said.

New rounds of budget cuts locally may produce more position cuts, and possible branch closings during the coming year, officials warn.

Some building openings have been delayed significantly.

When the Centreville Library does open, with its dazzling array of high-tech reference material and computerized card catalogue, it will be a community library, with limited staff and materials, not the regional facility originally planned, with an extensive research collection. It will be open 54 hours a week, instead of 71.

The library's books are in storage, waiting for more than \$680,000 in shelving and other supplies held up in the budget process for Centreville and two other libraries.

But librarians point to the popularity of technology when they buy it.

On a recent afternoon, Fairfax

County resident Chuck Stuart sat in front of a computer terminal at the Fairfax City regional library and searched through InfoTrac to find information on executive search firms. His goal: a job.

"I'm hoping this will steer me in the right direction," Stuart said.

Henry Randall, a college student working at an Alexandria branch, said the system "saves a lot of time" compared with manual microfiche and card catalogue searches. "You just punch in a number and it pops up . . . I use it all the time."

But Noreen Shorey of Sterling, who regularly goes to the Sterling Library to borrow books to read to her young daughter, said she opposes spending scarce funds on new technology when basic services are threatened.

"It doesn't sound like it's fair," she said. "I'd be really upset if they cut back services; it's one of the last things that's free."

Although the cost of library equipment has been rising steadily, electronic equipment still makes up a relatively small part of any library budget, with personnel costs eating nearly 80 percent of funding.

In the District, for example, libraries have a \$21.7 million budget this year. Of that, more than \$400,000 will go for high-technology purchases and services, including \$144,000 for electronic data retrieval, according to library officials.

Although, as in most areas, D.C. patrons have an appetite for audiovisual materials that can be checked out, the book is still king. Books and other printed matter take up 85 percent of the purchasing budget.

Even facing budget cuts in the next year, D.C. officials say there's little they could carve out of the budget for electronic equipment.

"There's virtually nothing we could get out of the technical stuff" to save money, said assistant director Larry Molumby. "There's no turning back from technology."