

Questions December 11, 2013

Q. We went to the library today and saw a notice on the door that the library is going to close for several days due to unpaid furlough days. Has the county cut their funding for the library?

A. No, we have not. Most of the library funding comes from the State of Georgia, and the state has cut their funding. Donna Howell, Director of the Mountain Regional Library System (Town, Union and Fannin Counties), had an excellent article in a recent issue of the North Georgia News which explains the situation. You can also go to the Mountain Regional Library website, www.mountainregionallibrary.org, and click on Press Release for more information.

Basically, state funding to all Georgia Public Libraries, including the Mountain Regional Library System, has steadily declined over the past several years. The Press Release states that the library system has had no state funds for library materials at all for the past 5 years and all four of the state-paid librarians in the system have taken a minimum of 12 unpaid furlough days each year – this year, they are taking 26 unpaid days. State funding for the MRL System has decreased from \$413,269 in 2008 to \$281,745 in 2013 – a cut of \$131,524. While it is true that some should and are happy to have a job and appreciate that, see if taking 26 days out of your pay a year would not have some serious impacts.

Q. Can the county do anything to help so the library won't have to be closed so long?

A. The county has already increased funding to the library as much as possible. In fact, the press release states that total funding from all local taxing agencies in all three counties has increased by \$39,750, but even that has not kept pace with actual expense increases and state revenue cuts.

Q. Can the library system do anything to cut expenses?

A. They have already cut as much as possible including cutting five positions at the regional library, not replacing staff in branches when feasible, converting benefits-eligible full-time positions into part-time non-benefits-eligible positions as these positions became vacant, and having state-paid staff take unpaid furloughs. All discretionary spending for supplies, programs, equipment, and other items have been drastically reduced.

Q. Will the passing of the recent SPLOST help with the library funding shortfall?

A. SPLOST will help in that certain funds have been identified to help with purchase of books and technology equipment, but it cannot be used for operation costs.

Q. What action can citizens take to help the library?

A. You can always make a donation to the library or contact your representatives and let them know how important the library is to you.

Q. We also heard that there have been budget cuts to Meals on Wheels that the Senior Center provides. Is this true?

A. Yes. The Senior Center receives a major part of their funding from the Federal Government and the Sequester cuts have hit them especially and disproportionately hard. The county HAS NOT cut our funding however. We did have some good news today that the freeze on signing up new people for

Meals on Wheels has been lifted. But the fact remains that their budget has been cut by \$20,000 and will be cut again in January and also in July by the Federal government. This is all due to the budget sequestration cuts in 2013.

Q. What in the world is budget sequestration? I have never heard of that.

A. The budget sequestration in 2013 refers to the automatic spending cuts to United States federal government spending as an austerity fiscal policy as a result of the Budget Control Act of 2011. The cuts are split evenly between the defense and non-defense categories. Some major programs like Social Security, Medicaid, federal pensions and veteran's benefits are exempt. The problem with Sequestration cuts is it does not look at any particular program and just cut out the waste, it cuts the same from all agencies and because of the funding calculations for Meals on Wheels, it is even worse. While you may cheer any time you hear that there is some type of budget cut from the federal government, you should also be aware there are consequences to many of those cuts. The Meals on Wheels program is one of the best government programs in existence and it is a disgrace that they have been cut the same as some other non-successful programs.

Q. What can we do to help with funding shortfalls?

A. There is always the need for donations to the Senior Center and I can promise you that we are not going to let our seniors go hungry. Often at Christmas, in the attempt to help children, we often forget about other needs in the county. Almost every time there is a cut at the Federal or State level, much of that burden is passed right down to local government to make up. It is pretty frustrating when I am doing all I can to keep your property taxes low and from going up and then we get more expenses dumped on the county because of other agency cuts. The people in Washington and Atlanta get to brag that they have cut taxes, but you can bet that much of the time the county has to help make up the difference.

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