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Good News! Making a Case to Your Funders

By **John Pepper**

Like a lot of libraries, Great River Regional Library (GRRL) in St. Cloud, MN, has seen some lean years recently as funding levels have failed to keep pace with usage patterns. Fortunately, the administration has been able to persuade its Board of Trustees and funding agencies that library workers need to be compensated fairly. Those at the lower end of the pay scale have seen their wages increased, and a classification and compensation study has ensured staff are compensated fairly within the system and within their community. In the process, relationships have been established that give rise to optimism for future negotiations.

GRRL is a consolidated regional library system covering 5,000 square miles in 6 counties with 32 libraries and 260 employees, headquartered in St. Cloud, Minnesota. The region includes two of the fastest growing counties in the state, and the population is growing steadily. From 1999 - 2004, circulation within GRRL increased 34.51%. During 2004, library patrons placed almost 280,000 requests from their home computers, generating significant additional work for library staff.

About three-quarters of the system's approximately \$6 million budget comes from the counties. Recent county funding levels have been approximately \$13 per capita. GRRL has always been a lean operation, and things began to get more difficult after 2002 when the state's political situation changed and counties found themselves shouldering a greater proportion of the general taxation burden. Although GRRL's overall revenues for 2003 and 2004 showed increases of 4.43% and 2.78% respectively, those increases failed to address the significant increases in system usage and operating costs. Staff received minimal raises of 2-2.5 percent, had their step increases frozen, and were required to take 1-2 days off without pay to balance the budget. Things were particularly hard for library aides at the bottom end of the pay scale who were earning less than workers in local fast-food restaurants. Some aides had been with the system for years and were making a significant contribution to keeping things running smoothly. The library administration felt that this group needed special attention.

Director Bescye P. Burnett decided that she had the best chance of turning this situation around if she could develop personal relationships with not only the county commissioners who sit on the Board of Trustees, but also with the county administrators who work closely with the commissioners. Beginning in the spring of 2004, she scheduled individual meetings with them at which she told the library's story and conveyed the need to make improvements to staff salaries, particularly those of Aides. She was able to show that their hourly salaries were no longer competitive, creating rapid turnover and increased cost. In addition, she told administrators that the management staff had agreed to forgo their traditional across-the-board increase so the library aides could receive a larger raise.

After the series of individual meetings with county administrators and county commissioners, and prior to the July Board meeting at which the final budget was to be approved, Burnett organized a meeting of all the county administrators and those county commissioners who sit on the GRRL Board of Trustees. They met in June, 2004, at the headquarters library together with the management staff. In this setting, Burnett laid out various funding scenarios for the year ahead, together with the opportunities and challenges that those funding levels would provide.

As a result of this process, for 2005, all staff, including management staff, received a raise of 28 cents/hour. Library aides received an additional raise of 8 cents/hour for a total of 36 cents/hour. The step increases were reinstated. In addition, the longevity pay program was extended to include all part-time staff (previously limited to staff working 20 hours/week or more and excluding library aides). This provided 55 additional staff with longevity pay, including 21 library aides. Additional library aide staff hours were also approved. However, all staff were still required to take one day off without pay to balance the budget. Burnett also gained approval for a classification and compensation study to be completed in 2005.

Results from this study, completed by an independent consulting company, were presented to the Board of Trustees at

its meeting on June 14, 2005. It used data from other regional library systems of similar size, together with data from other organizations, to develop a revised Classification and Compensation Plan designed to ensure staff would be compensated fairly not just in comparison to staff at other libraries, but also in comparison to the general regional labor market. This would ensure that the library could be competitive not only in hiring librarians, but also hiring other positions not specific to libraries such as HR staff. The Board of Trustees approved implementation of the study, dependent on funding.

Burnett repeated the same process of individual meetings with county commissioners and county administrators that she initiated in 2004. Then, on June 27, 2005, a general meeting of county administrators and county commissioner Board members took place at St. Cloud Public Library. They decided to recommend a funding increase of 8.24% based primarily on staffing needs. The GRRL Board of Trustees approved this budget increase at its July meeting.

This increase, double or almost quadruple that of previous years, will help to address some of the most significant staffing concerns of GRRL. It will not solve all the issues, but the groundwork that has been done to establish open and honest relationships with the region's primary funders offers continued hope for the future.

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