

# THE SARASOTA NEWSLEADER

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## Opening of two libraries on Sunday afternoons as pilot program wins initial County Commission support

May 30, 2019 by Rachel Brown Hackney, Editor & Publisher

**Board members also hear updates on projects planned over the next five years, including new Central Energy Plant and realignment of Cattlemen Road/Palmer Boulevard/Packinghouse Road 'triangle'**

With its typically more intense budget workshops just weeks away — starting on June 18 — the Sarasota County Commission already has provided staff direction on a number of issues, including funding a six-month pilot program to open two libraries on Sundays.

Among other priorities are the continuing work on the Central Energy Plant in downtown Sarasota, which provides heating, air conditioning and ventilation (HVAC) services to a number of county facilities, including the jail; new pickleball courts on Pompano Avenue near the Sarasota County Fairgrounds; and more bus shelter construction.



Selby Public Library is in downtown Sarasota.  
File photo

Prior to their May 17 review of the county's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for the next five fiscal years — 2020 through 2024 — the commissioners heard from two representatives of the [Community Advocacy Team of the Library Foundation for Sarasota County](#). They offered pleas for the Sunday pilot program and for additional funding for library collections in the 2020 fiscal year, which will begin Oct. 1.

Dan Bailey, a partner with the Williams Parker law firm in Sarasota, told the board, "I can recall the good times when we had libraries open on Sunday afternoons," before the Great Recession began.

Four of the facilities were open from 1 to 5 p.m., he pointed out.

The Community Advocacy Team (CAT) requested that the commission consider a pilot program at [Selby Library in downtown Sarasota](#) and the [Jacaranda Library in Venice](#), Bailey added. Approximately 20% of the homes in the county have no internet service, Bailey stressed. "Children often need that [access to libraries] for getting homework done."

Fletcher Rush, an attorney with the Farr Law Firm in Venice, then talked of the fact that the Library Foundation is halfway to its goal of raising \$2.1 million for Creation Stations within the county libraries. Those centers enable patrons to use 3D printing equipment and sewing machines, for examples.

He then turned to the issue of the collections. They "are the lifeblood of our libraries," Rush stressed.

Not only should the county be spending more money on books, he indicated, but also, additionally, "We need to be reaching those folks in our community that are underserved" by providing other materials, such as study and test preparation guides.

In response to a question later from Commissioner Alan Maio, Sarabeth Kalajian, director of the Libraries and Historical Resources Department, said she planned to propose an extra \$150,000 in her budget for the 2020 fiscal year for collections. That will be part of her presentation during the June workshops, she added.

Chair Charles Hines then asked if she needed direction from the commission to plan on the pilot program for Sundays.

"It's not currently in Sarabeth's [FY20] budget," County Administrator Jonathan Lewis pointed out. If the board wants funding for that in the budget, Lewis added, staff will take the necessary steps.

Commissioner Michael Moran immediately offered his support. "I was that kid that used the library on Sundays, so this is not a stretch at all to me to support such a thing."

"I have not made up my mind yet," Maio told Kalajian. "I want to see exacting numbers from you," he told her: a proposal for keeping two libraries open just four or five hours on Sundays for six months, beginning Oct. 1.

That will put more demand on the county's General Fund, Maio pointed out, which is its most constrained source of funding, staff has emphasized. The General Fund is made up largely of property tax revenue. (See the related article in this issue.)

If the board approves a pilot program, Maio continued, he also would like to see "some quantifying numbers of how much usage" results from those extra library hours.

Hines told Kalajian he would like her thoughts on which would be the best two libraries for the pilot program, as well as details about how the extra hours would affect her staffing. Hines added that he was not in favor of having to hire extra personnel with no certainty that they would be able to remain in county employment if the commission chose not to continue the Sunday hours after the pilot program ended.

Nonetheless, Hines said, "I do believe that there's a *big* segment in our community that needs those Sunday hours," especially students and people looking for jobs or career advancement.

Maio also pointed out that about 51% of the approximately 42,000 students in the Sarasota County School District qualify for free or reduced-price lunches as a result of their families' income levels. He easily could believe, he continued, that the families of those children "certainly don't have the money to wire up their house or apartment with internet."

Commissioner Christian Ziegler, who was just elected to the board in November 2018, asked Kalajian about the Sunday usage before the recession.



The Jacaranda Library is in Venice. Image courtesy Sarasota County



Sarasota County Commissioner Alan Maio. File photo

“For four hours, it’s a pretty high usage,” she replied. Library staff saw students, families “and working folks who needed access to technology,” she said, along with people who were unable to go to a library at any other time of the week.

As for extra funding for the collections: Maio noted that he recently requested two books from the library he uses. He was put down as No. 88 on the waiting list for one; No. 77, for the other, he noted. Yet, he understood that staff had ordered 30 copies of one of those books. “I will entirely support [more funds for the collections].”

Hines then made it clear to Lewis that the commission consensus is for staff to plan on the pilot program for the FY20 fiscal year budget.

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