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VALLEY BALLOT MEASURES

A tax for the books

Yakima voters approve annexation into regional library system

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YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Now that Yakima voters have approved annexing the city's libraries into the Yakima Regional Library district, the threat of closing the Southeast Yakima and Summitview Avenue branches has passed.

"I'm thrilled," said Library Director Monica Weyhe, all smiles after the results were announced Tuesday evening at the county courthouse. "It's a wonderful feeling to see how

much the city values its library services. It's great to be able to look forward to the future."

According to the unofficial results from the elections office, more than 58 percent approved the library annexation, with 8,945 voting yes to 4,990 no votes. A simple majority was needed to pass the ballot measure.

About 11,914, or 35 percent, of Yakima's 34,229 registered voters cast ballots in this election.

Annexation means that city resi-

dents will be taxed directly for library services, rather than indirectly from property taxes paid to the city. Beginning next year, they will pay the district's levy rate of 47.5 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

This is an increase from what the city paid, which amounted to 32 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. Because of the annexation, the city will no longer have to help support library

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services and will see an increase in revenue, to the tune of \$800,000.

The library district's net gain from the city's annexation is a conservative estimate of \$668,000 in the first year. The library system's operating budget this year is about \$8.2 million.

Weyhe and Victor Lara, a Yakima attorney and vice president of the library board of trustees, have said that the additional revenue is needed now more than ever.

Because of financial constraints, there had been talk of closing the Summitview Avenue and Southeast Yakima libraries within the next couple of years. This was a realistic risk, Weyhe has said, because of anticipated cuts from the city of Yakima.

Bruce Smith, publisher of the Yakima Valley Business Times, has been an outspoken critic of the annexation. In his editorials published last month, he equated the threat of closing the library branches to the Chicken Little argument that the sky is falling.

Although he agrees Yakima residents should pay the same as district residents for library service, Smith believes there never was a real risk of library closures.

"I wish it had gone the other way, but that's what elections are for," he said about the vote. "I do think it was rushed through fast, but it was

a decisive victory. ... I'm not trying to be a winner or a sore loser. I still believe absolutely everything I said."

With annexation, Weyhe and Lara said improvements to the city's libraries are now possible. This could include everything from equipment upgrades to connecting with the county's fiber-optic and wireless network. Joining the county's system would also give library users high-speed Internet access.

"It's going to take a little bit of time to see the change, but ultimately, this direct funding means we're able to plan long term for better library services throughout the county," Lara said. "We have to change with the times. The fact that we have certain funding will help us to do that in a better and more cohesive manner."

Yakima's three branches — downtown, Summitview Avenue and Southeast Yakima — are joining a district that includes 19 other branches. There's one in every Yakima County city and town, except Grandview, plus the communities of Nile, Terrace Heights, White Swan and Buna.

Other cities that have been annexed into the district include Selah, Sunnyside, Toppenish.

The special election will be certified on May 5.

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