

State of Oregon's Public Libraries

2016 Report to the OLA Library Development and Legislation Committee

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Background

Oregon has 137 public library entities listed in the Oregon State Library statistical database updated in late 2014.¹ Branch libraries and other outlets bring the total number of library facilities in the state to 224. Oregon's libraries are organized in different ways and consequently, are funded from various streams.

In general, Oregon's public libraries receive 92% of their funding locally compared to 84% on average nationally². Less than 1% of funding comes from state government compared to an average of 7% nationally². The instability of funding for some of Oregon's libraries leads to inadequate staffing and consequently, limited access to library resources and services. Overall, Oregon's public libraries are vital community institutions, providing excellent services that are used and enjoyed by many³. In fact, Oregon often outpaces the rest of the country in terms of usage. They also respond to changing community needs and expectations such as fast Internet access, accessible meeting rooms and the latest in print and electronic books.

However, stable funding remains elusive for some libraries and others work with a less than robust budget. The six counties in southern Oregon (Josephine, Douglas, Klamath, Jackson, Coos and Curry) provide an interesting means to explore this problem. These six counties have historically been the most dependent on Federal O&C Funds. As a result of depleted funds, each library system has developed a different funding structure with varying levels of service. Currently political challenges in some of these counties make long-term sustainability impossible. We compared the data from the State Library for 2003-2004, 2008-2009 and 2013-2014, looking for trends over that 10-year period.

This report attempts to give a picture of the status of the O&C Counties' public libraries over the last ten years. The two counties with library special districts (Coos and Curry) appear to have fared better in term of providing consistent services and access. Klamath County operates as a service district paying the county for management; while providing satisfactory service, this form of district restricts independence from county politics. Douglas County, a county system, is in decline due to the economic climate in the county. Josephine County, a nonprofit, library with limited paid staff, is working diligently to secure more stable funding through a district; its first two attempts at a countywide library special district failed in 2007 and 2014 and another attempt will be on the ballot in 2017. Jackson County traditionally had strong public libraries, yet has seen declines that correlate with economic issues in the county and the transfer of management to a private, for-profit company that contracts with the county. However, the county residents passed a library special district in 2014 and that funding source will affect the future of library services.

It is challenging to adequately describe library services throughout this region given the geographic breadth and the variety of libraries in terms of size and governance. Research at a county or district could reveal more about priorities and management strategies. We choose to focus on staffing as one lens for examining the sustainability of a library as adequate, expert library staff members are crucial to a library's success.

Focus on the Six Oregon Counties Affected by the Reduction of Federal O&C Funds

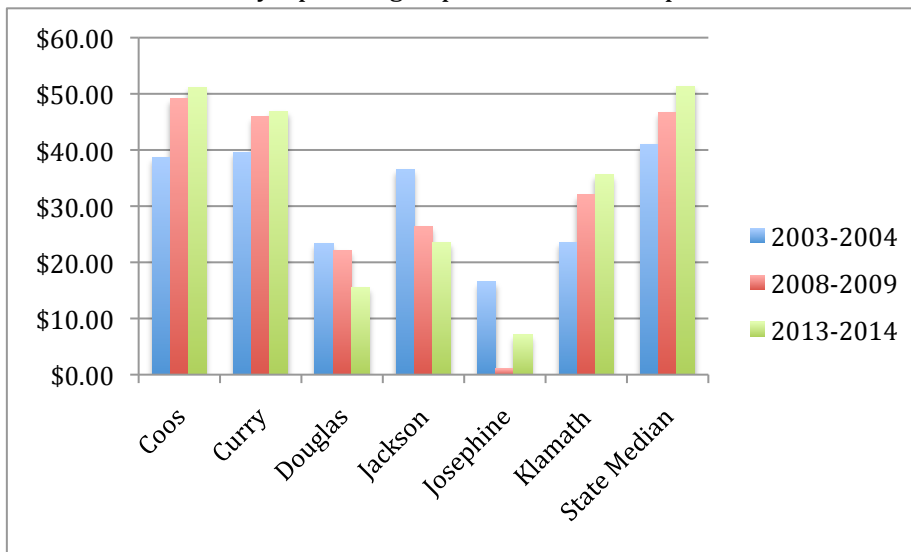
Population growth varied over the ten years⁴. The state’s overall population growth over the past ten years was 10.7%.⁵ Except for Jackson County, these counties lag behind growth in other parts of the state.

Table 1: County Population

	2003-2004	2008-2009	2013-2014	Change
Coos	63,000	63,210	62,869	-0.21%
Curry	20,762	21,135	21,967	5.80%
Douglas	101,800	105,240	108,850	6.93%
Jackson	189,100	205,305	206,310	9.10%
Josephine	78,350	83,290	82,815	5.70%
Klamath	64,600	66,180	66,810	3.42%

Total library revenues in the six counties vary widely given taxing authority and size. Comparing library expenditures per capita gives a clearer concept of the investment in public libraries in these counties (Chart 1). Coos and Curry came closest to the state median. Klamath, while lagging behind, shows a steady increase in investment. Josephine’s data reflect the closing of the public library system and then, its reopening as a non-profit entity, an interim strategy while pursuing the path to regain its publicly funded status. Douglas County suggests a slow decline in revenue. Jackson County’s decline is more difficult to explain, and may relate to the terms of the county’s contract for private management.

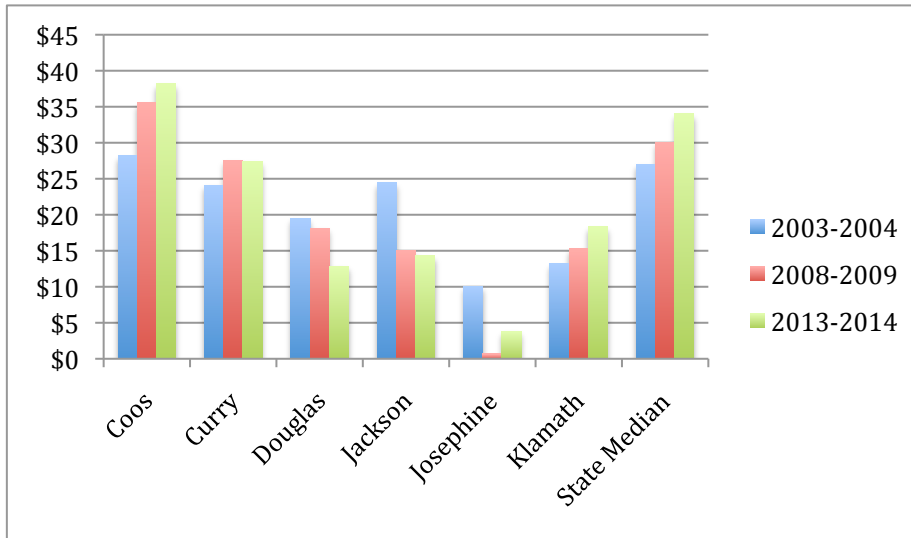
Chart 1: Total Library Operating Expenditures Per Capital



Expenditures on staffing reflect similar trends (Chart 2). Staffing can be a strong indicator of library service and sustainability; job security and adequate compensation are directly related to the quality of service. An intriguing question is “What makes a library a good place to work?” Is it pay, management expertise, investment in collections, hours (e.g. part-time vs. fulltime), community support, life/work balance? We suggest that it is a combination of these factors, and

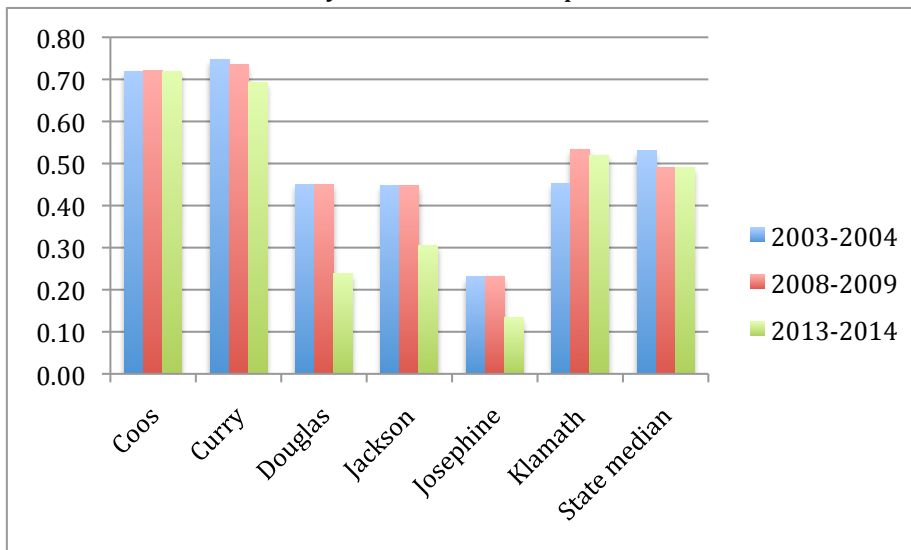
adequate compensation is only part of the staffing issues. Library staff in southern Oregon are constantly asked to do more with less; this leads to an overloaded staff, diminished time for professional development and ultimately challenging retention rates.

Chart 2: Expenditures on Library Staff Per Capita



Libraries are more than just buildings and books. Adequate and experienced staff members make a big difference in the quality of collections, programs and management (Chart 3). There need to be enough staff to keep buildings open and functional as well as provide programs and guidance for users. Too few library staff stretches those who are working, limits hours of operation, and can put too much reliance on the goodwill of volunteers. Reaching the 'right' level of staffing requires evaluating community needs and planning how to best meet those needs as well as expectations. OLA's Public Library Division Standards includes ones that clearly describe essential attributes for library staffing⁶.

Chart 3: Number of Library Staff Per 1000 Population



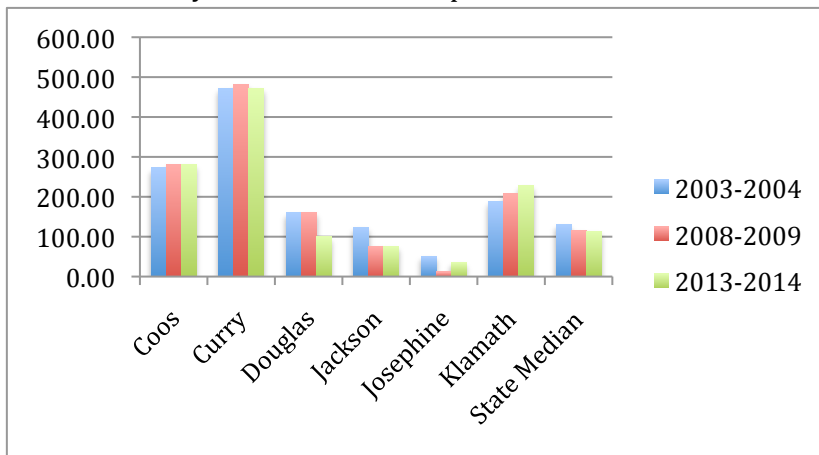
Access varies considerably given the geography of each of the southern Oregon counties as well as their histories of library development (Table 2). In general, the primary cities and towns in each are served by a public library. Smaller communities or rural areas may have limited access.

Table 2: Number of Library Outlets

County	Main Library	Outlets or Branches	County Population	Population Per Outlet
Coos		8	62,869	7,859
Curry	5		21,967	4,394
Douglas	1	10	108,850	9,895
Jackson	1	14	206,310	13,754
Josephine	1	3	82,815	29,704
Klamath	1	11	66,810	5,568

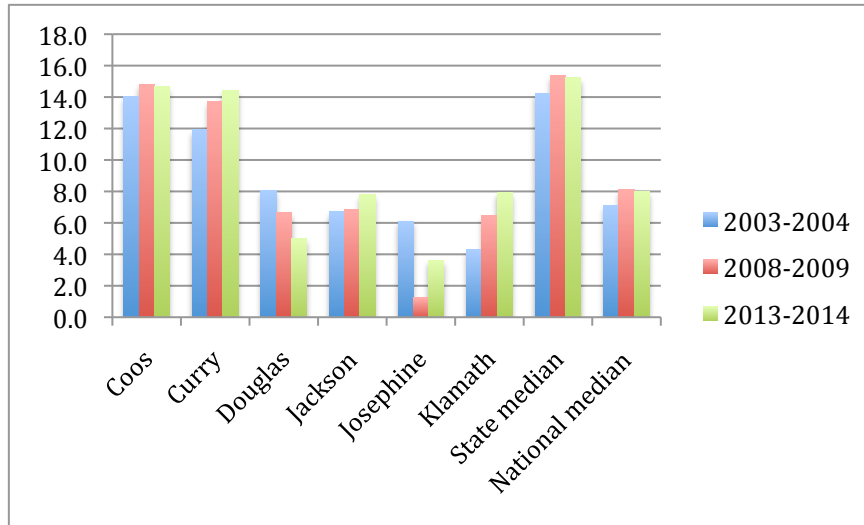
Establishment of library districts with focused funding appears to provide more consistent access in terms of outlets and hours of operation (Coos, Curry, Klamath) (Chart 4). The state median is consistently lower reflecting both increased population statewide without related increase in outlets and unserved populations.

Chart 4: Library Hours Per 1000 Population



Circulation per capita can rely on a variety of factors including access to libraries and adequate collections in a variety of formats. Coos and Curry County library users are very close to the state median and well above the national median. Klamath County shows a strong increase in circulation per capita. This may be a factor of changes in the collection such as demand for electronic books and DVDs, and changes in the economy. With the 2008 Recession, library usage increased nationwide⁷. The decline in Douglas County indicates the impact of reduced library hours. Josephine County's numbers reflect the closure of its libraries and later reopening with reduced hours.

Chart 5: Circulation Per Capita



The Oregon Library Association's Perspective

The Oregon Library Association (OLA) supports local, public management of public libraries - a responsive approach that serves the unique needs of Oregon's varied communities. That said, funding should be stable to ensure adequate access, resources and expertise. The last of those is perhaps the most important. Without librarians and library staff, buildings cannot open, books are not recommended and circulated, stories are not read out loud, and computer classes are not taught. Library users rely on librarians to provide access to information and to teach them how to use it effectively to increase their chances of getting a job, enhance their parenting skills and more. A successful library is one where the staff members are compensated to meet the high demand for quality service and feel secure in their future both in terms of job stability and professional growth.

References

- ¹ Oregon State Library. 2014. *2013-2014 Oregon Public Library Spreadsheet*. Available at: <http://www.oregon.gov/osl/LD/Pages/statsploregon.aspx>
- ² Penny Hummel Consulting. 2015. *Oregon Public Library Needs Assessment*. Portland: Oregon Community Foundation. Available at: <http://www.oregoncf.org/news-resources/reports/current/library-needs-assessment-2015>
- ² *ibid.*
- ³ Institute of Museum and Library Services/National Center for Education Statistics. [2014]. *Public Library Survey FY 2003-2012*. Washington, D.C.: The Institute. Available at: https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/assets/1/AssetManager/PLS_FY2012_SP_Oregon.pdf
- ⁴ Population data was from the State Library's public library statistics. These numbers may differ from other sources.
- ⁵ Will Burchard. 2015. *Population Growth Rate Increases in Oregon for Third Straight Year*. Salem: State of Oregon Employment Department. Available at: <https://www.qualityinfo.org/-/population-growth-rate-increases-in-oregon-for-third-straight-year>
- ⁶ Oregon Library Association, Public Library Division. 2015. *Standards for Oregon Public Libraries*. La Grande: OLA. Available at: <https://ola.memberclicks.net/pld-standards-committee-mtg-minutes>
- ⁷ *The State of America's Libraries: A report from the American Library Association*. [2011]. Chicago: American Library Association.