

Area libraries need help for next chapter



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When I was a kid, I loved to read. I would come home from school and read one book before I even started my homework.

I read anything. I read the Hardy Boys. I read Sweet Valley High. I read Stephen King. I read Judy Blume. I read those Harlequin books my mother hid in the basement. (Sorry, Mom. For the record, I wish I hadn't. The writing was terrible. And you can only tell the story about the damsel in distress who finds a strong but sensitive man in the wilds of Alaska so many times.)

Most of the books I read, though, came from my library, which was four blocks away from my house. I could take out up to 10 books a day, or I could just sit there and read them. You couldn't take the reference books, but I could make copies of pages I needed -- for free.

That sort of library service is still available to everyone in Pittsburgh. The question is how long it will last. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh system, faced for the second year with another cut in state money, is hoping for extra cash from the Allegheny Regional Asset District -- nearly \$2 million more than it requested last year.

That's the same amount of funding it lost from the state in the last year. If the system doesn't get the money, it could lead to some real changes at your nearby branch, including cuts in hours, programs and materials.

You might ask: Why does the library need money, anyway? Why don't they stop begging? What are they, NPR?

Have you been to a library lately? Had you noticed that you could borrow books, music and DVDs for free? For free. I'm not talking about old movies, either. I just got "Avatar" from the library.

Libraries have to pay for the materials they trust you to borrow for free. They have to keep the buildings well-lit and air conditioned so that you can sit there and read books or check your e-mail. They have to pay full-time staffers -- the ones who tell you to keep the noise down.

RAD plans to review the library's application for money in August. Show your support for the library by contacting your state representative about the budget cuts, or consider donating money to a library. The library system recommends writing letters to the Trib and other news organizations in the region.

Consider volunteering an hour or so each week at your neighborhood library. Just because it's free doesn't mean you shouldn't give back. I know I will. The idea that one day my kid wouldn't be able to take out a stack of books for free and read one before starting homework makes me nervous.