



Bulletin photo by Jon Avise

The city of Newport is growing its now city-run library and community center — formerly a branch of the Washington County Library System — and is planning to add evening and weekend hours in coming months. Washington County closed its Newport branch last December due to budget cuts.

# Room to grow

## City's reading room and community center off to good start

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The decision by Washington County officials to shutter the more than century-old branch of the county's library system last month could have spelled the end of the former Baptist church's run as a quiet place to catch up on reading in the city.

Instead, Newport has turned the city-owned building into a city-run library and community center — and now is planning to extend hours beyond those offered when Washington County and its shrinking library budget was still in charge.

Cuts to the county library budget forced officials to close libraries in Newport and Marine

on St. Croix on Dec. 30. In their place, the county installed a system of book lockers and computer kiosks called Library to Go, where residents can pick up and drop off requested library materials 24-7. Newport's library kiosk is located at City Hall, at 596 Seventh Ave.

But in Newport, the city has been hard at work to keep the old library building alive as a community gathering place. A book drive late last month brought in roughly 1,000 books, magazines, videos and games, said City Administrator Brian Anderson.

"We're trying to turn it into a digital library [and] reading room for adults and kids," Anderson said. Wireless internet is available plus six computers including three new laptops donated by Washington County.

Now, the city is adding an additional part-time staffer — and seeking more volunteer help — to staff the library and expand the community room's availability.

The city already hired Newport resident Mike Laughton to staff the new library 20 hours per week and Anderson said another part-timer is on the way. That will allow the city to open the building an additional 20 hours each week — and during evening and weekend hours that were non-existent after previous budget cuts had slashed hours at the county's smallest libraries.

Under the same budget that closed Newport's library, the county's largest libraries also saw their hours slashed, with Sunday and Monday hours at the busy Woodbury, Forest Lake and Cottage Grove branches eliminated.

Anderson said the plan is to add Saturday hours and, eventually, Sunday afternoon hours during the summer months.

"We see some cities — like Woodbury — going backwards on weekend hours," Anderson said. "And in Newport we're adding hours."