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Riley Zalbert  
*Seattle University*

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# Remedying Recent Issues For the Seattle Public Library

Riley Zalbert, Volunteer Reporter

With staffing issues becoming a problem for Seattle Public Libraries (SPL), they have recently scheduled closures at branches across the region running until June 4, while finding temporary staff to fill positions needed. This is largely due to the library union and about 30 other unions in the city going through new budgetary agreements and contracts with the Mayor's Office for the next fiscal year.

Until updated agreements are reached, there are unanswered questions about what will happen with the staff.

When speaking to Executive Director of SPL Tom Fay, he explained some of the issues that are facing the library.

"These are things that we see nationally right now, with almost every library system, especially larger ones, you're going to have some vacancy issues because sometimes it's hard to fill certain roles. And then again, you might just have periods, where you have certain folks retiring, so that also affects it," Fay said.

With these different roles, Fay explained how the library typically budgets 4% for the vacancies as it varies during the year.

"So you could see that being in the six or seven range at any given time on an average year...During the pandemic, those numbers were much higher as it was hard to get people and we had people that were wanting to work from home," Fay said.

The union also has a specific 'reduction in force' ordinance that replaces some of the newest workers that are hired with the newest skill sets. That has unfortunately created some unforeseen issues for the staff.

The library also has the ability to temporarily freeze positions from 30 to up to 45 days to potentially get savings, which allows Fay and his team time to analyze next steps.

Rob Gannon, the director of administrative services at SPL, oversees security, the budget, the financial teams, the capital improvement programs, the facility management teams, the janitor, the custodial teams and all of the compromises of administrative services.

They see all sorts of different needs expressed by patrons, ranging from the north end of the city to the south end. There are a number of issues, but trying to keep buildings open, clean, safe and accessible is a priority.

"We're trying to support each of the buildings with enough staff to productively interact with all the patrons that come in. We're



Zam Ortega

trying to respond to any number of events that may occur that could disrupt sort of the normal day-to-day operations of a library, and we have a lot of visitors that come into our buildings, all of them accessing the library for their own individual unique purposes. And sometimes they need more support than what they may have anticipated,” Gannon said.

Gannon clarified that the library is a new environment for him, only being in the position for the last four months, and he wants to make sure that he can understand what a local branch can offer to the community and his local patrons.

As he adapts to the library environment, Gannon reminds himself that nothing is static and that they’re always trying to find new and better ways to serve. The balance of resources may be good for some time, but it also has to evolve and change as the community grows.

Sarah Barbara Watstein, the dean of the Lemieux Library and McGoldrick Learning Commons, spoke about which branch she visits and what she’s noticed at her local branch.

“I’m usually there on Saturday at some point, and I’ve not really seen many changes there. The branch is pretty active in terms of adults, teenagers and children, and people are in and out. There’s a couple of folks I see that are regularly sitting there and reading and doing things, but if it’s busy, it’s not jammed,” Watstein said.

Watstein’s go-to is the Columbia City library branch for getting off campus. Now that the branch has been affected by the closures, she won’t be able to visit on Saturdays until June.

While understanding that there are multiple factors to the issues that the libraries are experiencing, it can be said that there was a monumental shift during the COVID-19 pandemic in the ways that public services like libraries are used. But on the local level, the effects are being felt throughout the system from staffing to the amount spent on e-books. Heading into the next fiscal year, there are still questions to be answered about those permanent and temporary positions and the libraries’ hours of operation after June 4.