



Save Our Libraries vs. Citizens Taxed Enough

A look at both sides of the library fund-cutting debate

RACHEL RUDD
NEWS EDITOR

The Craighead County/Jonesboro Public Library has been the center of fierce debate since the introduction of a ballot measure that would cut the library's budget.

The initiative was submitted on Sept. 27 and approved by the Craighead County Election Commission on Sept. 29. It requires a 50% majority plus one to pass.

The group Citizens Taxed Enough, who introduced the petition, said the library is overfunded and that the measure would save taxpayers up to \$1 million annually.

"If you look at the Craighead County records, right now through the end of September, they have received just under \$2.1 million," said Robin Martin, treasurer of Citizens Taxed Enough, in the Kiwanis Club debate. "In my conversations with Terry McNatt (Craighead County treasurer) over the last month, he said those numbers were going to be stronger than that. We're probably looking at \$2.2 million to \$2.3 million coming in the rest of the year."

The Save Our Libraries campaign has been battling against the measure for the past four weeks, with the campaign concluding on Nov. 8.

Iris Stevens, coordinator of Citizens Taxed Enough, said Craighead County is one of ten counties whose libraries have a budget of two mils.

"The Craighead County/Jonesboro Public Library pulls in \$750,000 more than all

(nine) other counties together," Stevens said. "That's almost three quarters of a million dollars more than all the others combined. As far as population, we're only 33,000 less in population than all other nine counties combined."

If the vote passes, the library's funding could be cut at the county level or the city level. If the county vote is lost, \$500,000 worth of budget could be lost. If the city vote is lost, the library could lose up to \$3 million.

"There's a county vote and a city vote and each one of them is to reduce our budget by one mil," said Vanessa Adams, director of the Craighead County/Jonesboro Public Library. "Our budget from the city and the county totals close to \$4 million. So 75% of that is city and 25% of that is county."

Adams added that if the county vote was lost, there would be a possibility that the county branches would have to be shut down. If city funding is lost, the library would have to cut hours, programming, personnel and put future plans on hold.

Stevens said the library would not be affected if the vote passes.

The Craighead County/Jonesboro Public Library is forward-funded, which means any revenue generated goes to paying the next year's bills. Adams said this was why the library appeared overfunded, due to a surplus of revenue leftover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically decreased spending.

Stevens said the surplus is the result of a 1994 initiative that increased the library's budget

from one mil to two mils. The purpose of the increase was to renovate existing branches, as well as build new branches in Monet, Caraway and Lake City.

"The voters voted on that extra million, but there was not a sunset clause put on it," Stevens said. "Frequently when you have a tax supported institution, they will try to raise a millage but they will put a sunset clause. Once the objective for that money is reached, the tax goes back down. That didn't happen to the Jonesboro Library. It just stayed on for 30 years."

Last year, the library came under fire for a Pride display in the children's section. Since then, the library has held numerous public meetings to discuss the issue of whether books with LGBTQ+ content belong in the library.

"If you look at some of the opposition's advertising, it will say things like we are not a safe environment for children," Adams said. "It all started because of that display."

Brian Mason, a doctoral student in heritage studies from Jonesboro who identifies as politically independent, said while he thought books like "The GayBCs" shouldn't have been in the children's section, they should not be removed from the library entirely.

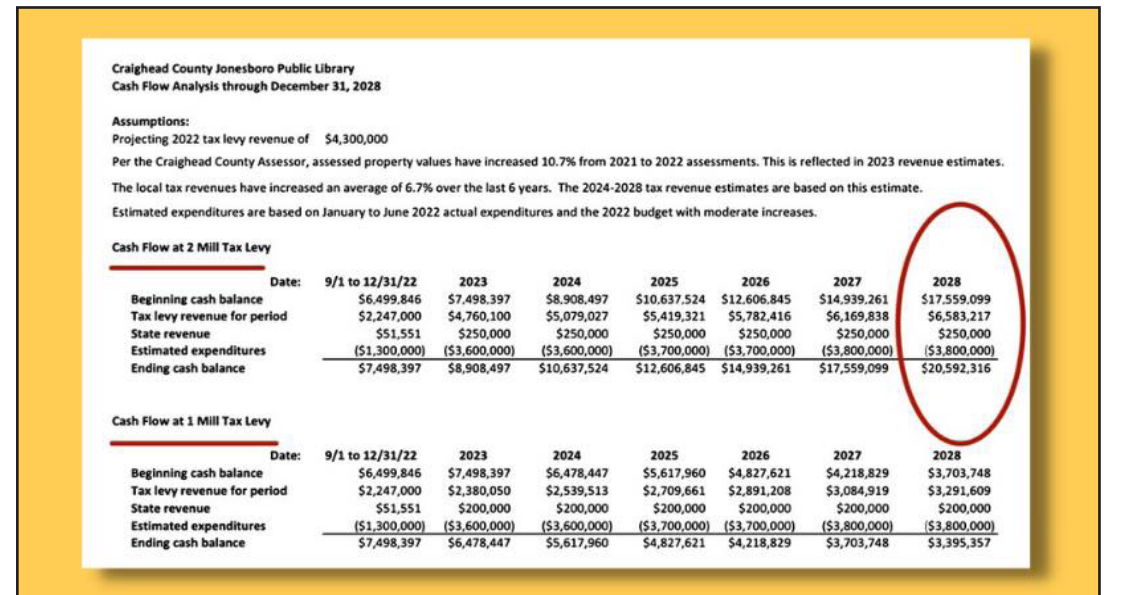
"It's something that parents should have the discernment before they read it to or give it to their child," Mason said.

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LIBRARY, 4A



Photo by Rachel Rudd | News Editor

Dean MacDonald Jr. (left) and Ann Long (right) tabling for Save Our Libraries in the Student Union.



GRAPHIC COURTESY OF CITIZENS TAXED ENOUGH

A graphic by Citizens Taxed Enough explaining the library's funding situation.

The issues on the ballot

State and local initiatives explained

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Political candidates will not be the only things people vote on this Election Day. The ballot also includes several state and county level issues people will vote either "for" or "against."

There are four state level initiatives. On the county level, there is one municipal issue, six school issues and the library tax cut initiative.

Issue No. 1 is a state constitutional amendment. It would allow the general assembly to call itself into a special session should the Speaker of the House and the president pro tempore jointly issue a summons, or by a proclamation signed by two-thirds of the members of each chamber.

Currently, only the governor can call a special session.

"We wanted to ensure through (the initiative) that special sessions remain special by requiring a higher threshold to allow the legislature to call itself into special session," said state Sen. Breanne Davis (R), who sponsored the amendment,

in a Ballotpedia article. "We also wanted to ensure that the legislative branch had the ability to call itself into a special session if necessary."

Issue No. 2 would change the requirements for a ballot measure to pass from a simple majority (50% plus one) to a three-fifths, or 60%, supermajority. A supermajority vote would be required for constitutional amendments and citizen-initiated state statutes.

The simple majority requirement would stay in place for veto referendums, which are citizen-initiated measures that ask voters to uphold or appeal a law passed by the state legislature. The measure was sponsored by state Rep. David Ray (R).

Issue No. 3 would amend the state constitution so as to ensure that the government cannot impede on a person's freedom of religion, unless the government can showcase compelling interest to do so using the least restrictive means.

The amendment would be called the "Arkansas Religious Freedom Amendment." It is modeled after the

United States Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

The amendment was sponsored by state Rep. Jimmy Gazaway (R), who told Arkansas Online the measure would "provide a stronger protection for religious freedom because it would only have to be proven that the government was burdening religious liberty, not that it was a substantial burden."

Issue No. 4 would legalize marijuana for people 21 years and older and authorize its commercial sale with a sales tax of 10%. Fifteen percent of that revenue would be used to fund an annual stipend for full-time police officers certified by the Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Training who are in good standing.

The measure would allow adults to possess up to one ounce of marijuana and allow businesses with medical marijuana licenses to sell the drug for recreation, as well as open one additional location only for commercial sale.

Issue No. 4 is sponsored by Responsible Growth Arkansas.



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There are four state issues on the ballot. For Craighead County, there is one municipal issue, six school issues and the library fund-cut initiative.

In Craighead County, voters will vote for or against electing Brookland city council members to four year staggered terms.

There are also six school tax levy issues on the ballot relating to Buffalo Island Central School District, Brookland School District, Jonesboro Public Schools, Nettleton School District, Valley View School District and Westside School District. The measures would include a 25 mil tax

on all taxable property to be used for maintenance and operation of each district.

A mil is defined as \$1 per every \$1,000 of assessed value.

Each school has its own unique tax levy. Buffalo Island has a levy of 40 mil, Brookland 39 mil, Jonesboro 33.1 mil, Nettleton 38.95 mil, Valley View 42.5 mil and Westside with a 34.42 mil levy.

After the 25 mil for maintenance and operation is

subtracted from the total levy, the remaining funds are to be used for reducing indebtedness. Any surplus revenues generated by the millage are to be used by the districts for "other school purposes."

The final local initiative is a petition to decrease the Craighead County/Jonesboro Public Library's operating costs from 2 mil to 1 mil.