

Group pushes Des Moines to use sales tax money to extend library hours



Ellie Hildebrandt poses for a photo inside the Des Moines Public Library on the south side, where she spends much of her time reading, studying and volunteering.

Bryon Houlgrave, The Register

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Ellie Hildebrandt spent her childhood combing the stacks at the South Side Library.

For the Roosevelt High School senior the library is a place to study, access free internet or just get lost in a book.

But most Des Moines Public Library branches are open only five days a week. And all except the downtown location are closed Sundays when students like Hildebrandt often do their homework.

"I think it should be open as much as humanly possible," Hildebrandt said. "It's helpful to low-income families that don't have the internet in general, and it's helpful just to people of all ages, sizes, colors."

AMOS, a local nonprofit focused on issues that affect central Iowa families, is pushing Des Moines to extend library hours. And it thinks it has the answer for how to do it: local option sales tax revenue.



Ellie Hildebrandt talks about how much time she spends at the Des Moines Public Library on the south side, where she spends a lot of time reading, studying, and volunteering.
Bryon Houlgrave, The Register

Des Moines could generate \$37 million a year by increasing the sales tax by 1 cent.

AMOS wants city officials to commit a portion of that money to restoring library hours.

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But first, voters must approve the 1-cent increase.

Des Moines has not scheduled a date for a sales tax referendum, but city officials have said it could come as soon as March.

Councilwoman Connie Boesen said she could support using sales tax revenue to bolster the library's budget, but there are other priorities that will contend for that money, namely public safety, [neighborhood improvements](#) and street repairs.

And at least half of any local option sales tax revenue would go directly toward property tax relief.

Joe Gatto, the Ward 4 council representative, said he hasn't heard concerns about library hours from his constituents.

He said he's skeptical of spending local option sales tax money on libraries.

Shuffling staff to fill holes

The downtown Central Library is open six days a week during the school year. It's open Monday through Friday, closed Saturday and open four hours on Sundays.

The library's five other branch locations are all closed Sundays and one other day each week. They rotate the closure days so at least some branches are open during the week.

Library Executive Director Susan Woody said she's seen the confusion on people's faces when they walk up to the doors of a Des Moines library in the middle of a weekday only to discover it's closed.

"They look at the sign that says we're closed on Tuesdays," she said, "and they shake their head like 'Why wouldn't this be open on a Tuesday afternoon at 2 o'clock?'"

Several nights a week, the branches close at 5 or 6 p.m. (rather than 8 p.m.) to save money and reduce staff hours.

The patchwork schedule lets Woody shuffle her staff from branch to branch to fill holes.

"It's like a chessboard," she said. "We move those pieces all the time."

Library hours and days of operation have changed as the library's budget has changed as financial support from the city has fluctuated.

Budget reductions in 2008 and 2012 caused the library to cut back hours. It converted branches to five days a week in 2012.

The library's budget has recovered considerably since then, growing from \$6.7 million in 2013 to \$8.3 million budgeted for 2019.

The vast majority of the library's budget — more than 85 percent — comes from the city.

“If we could just get a few more full-time positions, we would be wanting and willing and ready to open our doors for those lost hours,” Woody said.



Maddie Bassman, library assistant youth services, reads a story during the Crafty Readers program at Des Moines Central Library in 2014.
Register file photo

Library is 'necessity for many people'

AMOS member Sally Boeskholt of Des Moines said library hours was an issue repeatedly brought up by residents during dozens of meetings the group held to consider how Des Moines should spend potential sales tax revenue.

The group presented its funding priorities to the City Council earlier this month.

Emma Reese, a Roosevelt senior, told council members how limited library hours could hamper her classmates' success.

“Students who don’t have reliable access to the internet at home rely on the library as a free public resource in order to study and do their school work,” Reese said. “When the library hours are cut, my classmates have even less access to the internet or other study materials.”

Reese and Hildebrandt both said much of their school work is done on a computer these days.

Woody said the library can be vital to poor people who don’t have reliable access to the internet or a computer at home. For some, the library is the only place where they can apply for a job or complete online homework.

“This is an economic necessity for many people,” Woody said.

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