



## LIBRARIES: In tough times, area branches report higher circulation figures

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— The signs are everywhere now, but the evidence is particularly strong at the local library. With the country's economy in a recession, library directors across the region report an uptick in people coming in to do everything ranging from borrowing a good book rather than buying one to using the public computers to search for a new job.

"When the country's in a recession, library usage just goes through the roof," said Town of Tonawanda Library Director Kate Weeks. "All of the libraries in the system are doing well."

Economists officially recognized the recession in the fall, but the economy was certainly lagging months before then and, as a result, local public libraries experienced record circulation figures in 2008.

Total circulation last year among the town's two branches — Kenmore and Kenilworth — rose 9 percent to 454,557 materials from 418,693 in 2007.

In Niagara County, the North Tonawanda library broke a record by eclipsing the 500,000 mark for the first time in its 115-year history, according to Director Peggy Waite. In 2008, the library loaned 514,013 books, magazines, videos, CDs and DVDs, or more than 28,000 more materials than the previous year.

"In these tough economic times, North Tonawanda residents are coming to their library to borrow print and audio-visual materials, use the computers and do personal research, saving themselves time and money," library director Peggy Waite said.

"Some days it was so hectic, we knew (the circulation) was going to be high," she added. "It's wonderful. Our staff is very pleased. We work hard to offer a lot of these wonderful services, and of course, North Tonawanda citizens pay for it, but we try to give them their money's worth."

Library directors cite the economy as the major contributing factor for the higher circulation figures. With the economy in a recession and tens of thousands of workers being laid off as a result, the average American just doesn't have as much discretionary income, and many people, especially in Western New York, are spending their time trying to find work.

"People don't want to spend 28 bucks for a hardcover book anymore," Weeks said. "That's \$28 that could go toward groceries. We've had lots of people who said they used to buy the books and now they're coming here."

Pam Gordon is among the many Niagara County residents who helped the North Tonawanda library achieve its milestone. When asked if she used the library more in the past year, Gordon replied, "absolutely." She said a trip to the local library is far more convenient and economical than going to a bookstore. "You can't buy books anymore, they're outrageous," she said of the prices.

Plus, Gordon said, "When you're researching something, it's a heck of a lot easier to come in here and find what you're looking for."

Diane Davignon agrees. "They carry the stuff that I'm interested in," Davignon said, seven or eight books on autism stacked on the table before her. "I didn't realize they had so many things here, or available through the system, and their help is phenomenal."

Area library directors say the upward trend is likely to continue through much of 2009. They hope that increasing numbers of people will take advantage of the materials and services their branches have to offer, and will continue to do so even when the economy rebounds.

One of most in-demand services is the use of public computers for document writing and Internet access.

“Computer usage is what’s really gone up,” Weeks said, adding that libraries in less affluent neighborhoods tend to have higher computer usage than towns such as Clarence, Orchard Park and Amherst.

Computer usage at the Town of Tonawanda’s two branches skyrocketed in 2008, with the Kenmore branch seeing 63 percent more use and Kenilworth nearly 80 percent. As a whole, the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library system’s computer usage increased 58 percent, she said. “To me, that’s the statistic that’s really telling,” Weeks said.

It’s due in large part to the fact that job-seekers are using local libraries to write their resume and apply for a job online.

While the economy does boost borrowed materials, Waite, of the North Tonawanda library, said its circulation has risen each year. “We assume it’s partly the economy, but circulation tends to go up as a rule,” she said. “People tend to use us more and more each year.”

Still, “Some people are using us more because they want to, and some because they have to,” Waite said.

Circulation at the City of Tonawanda Public Library was on par with 2007, but the library saw more people attending its programs throughout the past year, Director Beverly Federspiel said. That was especially true for the branch’s summer programs, when gas prices were at record highs.

Federspiel said the library took in a higher number of the old blue and white borrower cards, indicating that people who hadn’t patronized the city branch for several years are coming back to it.

“Tough economic times usually bring people back to their libraries,” she said.

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#### Photos



090112 LIBRARY USAGE1 - TON/JAN DOUG BENZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER NORTH

TONAWANDA, N.Y. - Natalie Brown is a senior page at the North Tonawanda Public Library, Monday, Jan. 12, 2009.



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TONAWANDA, N.Y. - The North Tonawanda Public Library, pictured Monday, Jan. 12, 2009.