

The Impact of the Recession on Public Library Use in Colorado

March 2011

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A CLOSER LOOK

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by

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The Impact of the Recession on Public Library Use in Colorado

Coloradans are continuing to experience tough economic times as they recover from the latest recession. In the absence of consumer confidence and aggressive investment in the private sector, spending and associated tax revenues are also down. This, in turn, is putting extraordinary pressure on the public sector at state and local levels. City councils, county commissions, special district boards, and the General Assembly are tightening their fiscal belts to historically low levels.

In this context, it is not surprising that Colorado public libraries are suffering financially. Between 2007 and 2009, 25 of the state's 114 public libraries (22%) experienced reductions in total revenue and another 19 (17%) saw no or negligible (i.e., less than 5%) revenue increases. That means that 44 public libraries in Colorado—39 percent, or two out of five—are in some degree of financial distress. If the additional pressure of population growth is taken into account, the situation is even worse. Thirty-two libraries (28%) saw their per capita local revenues drop between 2007 and 2009, and another 17 (15%) experienced little or no increase in funding—meaning that a total of 49 libraries (43%) are under fiscal pressures.

Fortunately, a few of the state's public libraries had previously-funded building campaigns come to fruition, leading to the opening of several new state-of-the-art central libraries and library branches. Other libraries set new service priorities for their own limited resources, and still others renewed efforts to let their users know just how much they can do to help. As the recession reached Colorado and deepened, a popular library bumper sticker slogan was proven to be true:

Libraries will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no libraries.

As Coloradans lost their jobs and homes, or grew fearful of losing them, many found that an old friend could serve them well: the public library. The library is a place where those who are casualties of a bad economy can turn for much-needed information, community, and help. This report shares the statistical trends for public library use before and since the onset of the latest recession. It also includes the voices of librarians from around the state, offering their observations and stories of how public libraries are helping in these difficult times.

Two conclusions are clear: Public libraries are more needed than ever, and they are stepping up as part of the social safety net that helps people protect the financial security of their families and build new futures when they must. For some, a new future means finding a job, sometimes in a new community; for others it means going back to school to re-tool for a new career; and for still others it means becoming entrepreneurial and creating their own jobs and jobs for others. People in all of these circumstances are finding the help they need at public libraries.

We see nearly 4 million visitors a year, and borrowing has risen to over 8 million checkouts each year. All that usage is a good thing for Colorado Springs and El Paso County. We are trying to retain "brainpower" in our state. We are trying to transition our state and region to a knowledge economy. We are trying to encourage new businesses to come to Colorado. So, let's celebrate the value of our public libraries, our community builders of brainpower and purveyors of knowledge. Good public library service is not just a quality of life issue; it is an economic issue as well.

Paula J. Miller, Executive Director
Pikes Peak Library District

Background

Prior to examining trends in public library use before and after the onset of the recession, it will be helpful to review what the term “recession” means and why various regions of the country experience any given recession on different schedules.

The Great Recession

On April 8, 2010, the Wall Street Journal reported that the Associated Press opted for the term “Great Recession” as a proper noun when referring to the latest recession. During the past year, according to the Factiva database, the phrase appeared in print more than 10,000 times. That includes references by President Obama (“All over our country...,” he said in December, “Americans who lost their jobs in the Great Recession are looking for work”) and White House economist Lawrence Summers (“There’s a Great Recession everywhere”) (Wessel, 2010). According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), the organization that officially determines the United States’ economic cycles, the Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009 (Isidore, 2010).¹

Definition of a Recession

In general, a recession is understood as a period of declining economic activity. This broad definition, however, does not indicate how to determine if an economy has experienced a brief dip in economic activity or a true recession. Claessens and Kose (2009) state that most commentators and analysts define a recession as “two consecutive quarters of decline in a country’s real (inflation adjusted) gross domestic product (GDP)” (p. 52). Though this criterion is an indicator of a recession, Claessens and Kose argue that it is too narrow and that additional measures of economic activity should be considered.

NBER does indeed use a more multi-faceted definition to establish if the country is in a recession. The NBER Business Cycle Dating Committee not only examines the measures of GDP, but also gross domestic income (GDI), employment, real income, and aggregate hours of work (NBER, 2010). Additionally, industrial production and manufacturing-trade sales may also be considered. “There is no fixed rule about what weights the committee assigns to the various indicators, or about what other measures contribute information to the process” (NBER, 2010, p. 1).

A variety of factors are examined to determine whether a recession has occurred, and many of these factors take time to assess. According to Claessens and Kose (2009), each recession is unique, but there are several common characteristics:

- Recessions typically last about one year.
- GDP declines by an average of 2 percent (5% for severe recessions).
- The average decline for industrial production and investment is more than 4 percent.
- International trade decreases, due to drops in exports and imports.

A variety of indicators—including measures of gross domestic product, gross domestic income, and employment—are assessed to determine whether a recession has occurred.

- The unemployment rate increases.
- Recessions are often associated with “erosion of house and equity values” and “turmoil in financial markets” (p. 53).

Regional Differences

An analysis by Wilkerson (2009) found that the twelve districts of the United States Federal Reserve System (FED) entered the Great Recession at different times. Colorado is part of the tenth district, which is headquartered in Kansas City. This district, which also includes Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, a portion of northern New Mexico, and a portion of western Missouri, entered the Great Recession late (Wilkerson, 2009). According to NBER, the United States entered the recession in December 2007, while the Kansas City district did not enter the recession until the third quarter of 2008 (Wilkerson, 2009). Among the other districts, three entered the recession early, two entered the recession at the same time as the U.S., and the six remaining districts entered the recession late. Similar differences have occurred in the timing of entry into previous recessions among the twelve districts.

Regional variations can largely be attributed to such factors as unique industrial structures and overextended real estate sectors (Steeves, 2009). Unique industrial structures are industries that are more heavily concentrated within a district, than throughout the nation. For example, the defining industries of the Kansas City district are mining, farming, and military. Districts where other industries are more prevalent, such as manufacturing or real estate, entered the recession earlier than the Kansas City district.

Additionally, rural communities experienced the Great Recession differently than metropolitan areas (Henderson & Akers, 2009; Henderson, 2010). In 2008, rural communities generally remained stable despite the fact that the recession had begun. Henderson and Akers state that commodity prices increased in the summer of 2008 and “the relative strength of the rural economy was fueled in part by its large concentration of commodity-based industries” (2009, p. 74).

Other factors helped rural areas hold their ground in 2008. First, the housing market crash did not affect rural areas as severely, because they were not as overbuilt as metro areas, and had fewer subprime loans and foreclosures (Henderson & Akers, 2009). Second, though rural communities were affected by the financial crisis, fewer jobs were lost in these communities as a result of it. In fact, between November 2007 and November 2008, employment grew by 0.8 percent in the rural areas of the Mountain region (Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico), whereas the metropolitan areas of the same region experienced a 0.1 percent decline in employment (Henderson & Akers, 2009).

Although rural communities generally held their ground in 2008, they felt the recession much more strongly in 2009. Henderson found that despite growth in 2008, employment in rural communities dropped nearly 4 percent from the previous year. In addition to more job losses, in 2009 the mining,



Image source: <http://www.federalreserveonline.org/>

manufacturing, and construction industries weakened, and home prices dropped by 1.8 percent in rural communities.

Summary

Timing was a key difference in how regions experienced the Great Recession. Some Federal Reserve Districts entered the recession early, while others entered late, and rural communities felt the effects of the recession later than metropolitan areas. Although rural economies held their ground in 2008, 2009 brought job losses, decline in key industries, and decreased home values. Although it took longer for some areas to enter the recession, no areas exited the latest economic decline unscathed.

Methodology

To determine the impact of the Great Recession on use of public libraries in Colorado, annual statistics were compared across four years for the following usage measures: visits per capita, circulation per capita, program attendance per 1,000 served, and Internet users per capita. The first two years, 2006 and 2007, were prior to the recession, and the remaining two years, 2008 and 2009, were after the recession's onset. Comparisons were made by calculating averages and percent change for the usage measures for each year.

The initial study group consisted of all 114 Colorado public libraries, subdivided into three legal service area (LSA) population groups: under 25,000, 25,000 or more, and resort.ⁱⁱ The statistics reported by these libraries were examined to determine whether any of them appeared to be outliers, meaning they deviated substantially from the averages for the usage measures. Those statistics that fell more than two standard deviations from the averages were tested using the Extreme Studentized Deviate Method to determine whether they were statistically significant outliers. Libraries that had significant outliers for a particular usage measure were removed from the analysis for that measure.

In addition to testing for outliers, usage measure statistics were scanned for the prevalence of missing data. Based on these examinations, adjustments were made to the data analysis plan as well as the study group. Regarding the data analysis plan, the Internet use measure was dropped from the analyses of libraries with LSA populations of 25,000 or more because 9 of these libraries (39%), including some of the largest systems in the state, either did not report numbers for at least one of the years in the study or had significant outliers.

In terms of adjustments made to the study group, it was determined that there was a high prevalence of missing data and outliers for libraries with LSA populations under 25,000. In addition, the fact that the recession's starting and ending dates were different for rural communities made it problematic to include them. Therefore, these smaller libraries were removed from the study because it was possible that these issues—especially the missing data and outliers issue—would impact the accuracy of the analyses. After making these eliminations, the final study group

A total of 34 Colorado public libraries were included in the study: 23 with LSA populations of 25,000 or more, and 11 resort libraries.

We have definitely seen increased usage of our two libraries...due to local, state and national economic issues...Our patron visits have increased in each of the past two years...In 2009 our visits increased from 116,000 to 133,000...in a county with a population of only about 15,000. Of course, we have lots of summer visitors and second-home owners.

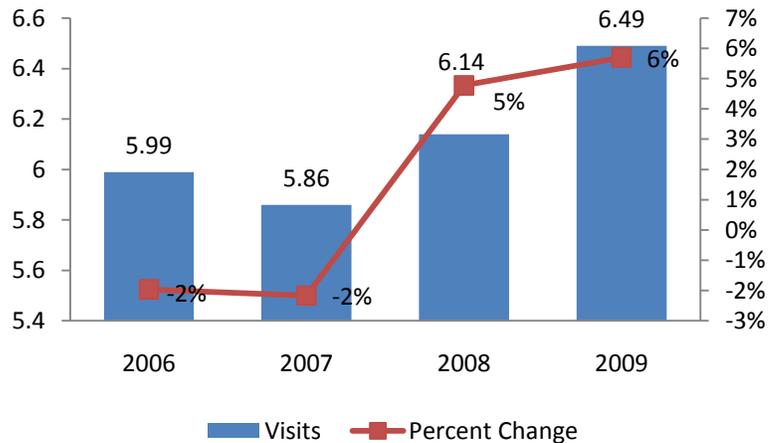
Larry Meredith, Director, Gunnison County Public Library

consisted of all Colorado public libraries with LSA populations of 25,000 or more (23 libraries), as well as those classified as resort libraries (11 libraries).

Library Visits Before and After Onset of the Recession

Users of public libraries visit library facilities for a variety of reasons. Many come to borrow books, DVDs, or CDs (i.e., circulation of materials). Others come to use a public Internet computer, or attend a program. Specific statistics on these types of library use will be examined separately. Visitors to libraries have a wide variety of other reasons for being there. Many of these reasons have to do with the value of the library as a public place. Public libraries provide many people with a quiet place to read, write, or study. They are also spaces for groups to gather—community meeting places. Libraries are places where people expect to find help for many different purposes, such as (but not limited to): completing homework, searching for a job, starting a business, learning about community agencies and organizations, and researching their family history. Public libraries provide spaces where users can do all of these things in addition to checking out books, using the Internet, or attending a program.

Chart 1
Visits Per Capita & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population

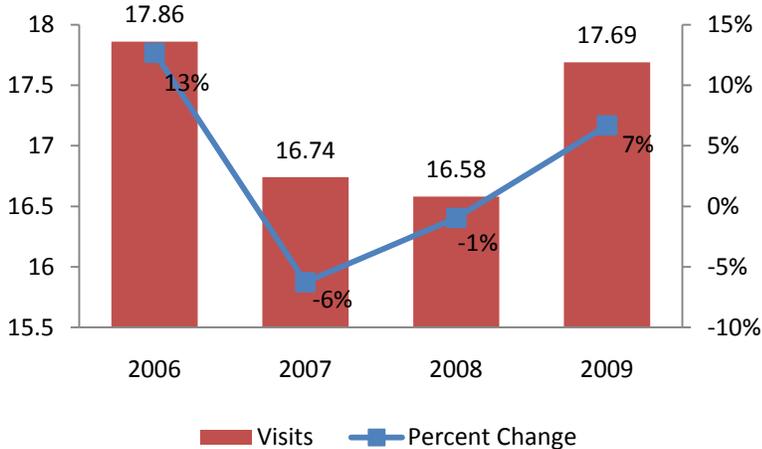


Durango Public Library offers a wide variety of resources for new entrepreneurs, some online and some in the circulating collection; but, some—along with the services of a research librarian—are available only at the library.

Business Information Resources
@ Your Library
Durango Public Library

In 2006 and 2007—before the recession's onset—visits per capita for libraries serving 25,000 or more was fairly static, but trending downward (-2% annually) (Chart 1). For the same interval, at resort libraries, this statistic reached a peak (13% in 2006) and then dipped (-6% in 2007) (Chart 2). After the recession began (2008 and 2009), visits per capita at larger libraries increased by at least 5% each year, while visits per capita at resort libraries recovered to pre-recession levels.

Chart 2
Visits Per Capita & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Resort Libraries



On most Tuesdays and Saturdays in early 2011, Jefferson County Public Library visitors will be able to obtain free tax assistance from American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) volunteers. A great benefit for in-person library visitors still struggling as the economy recovers.

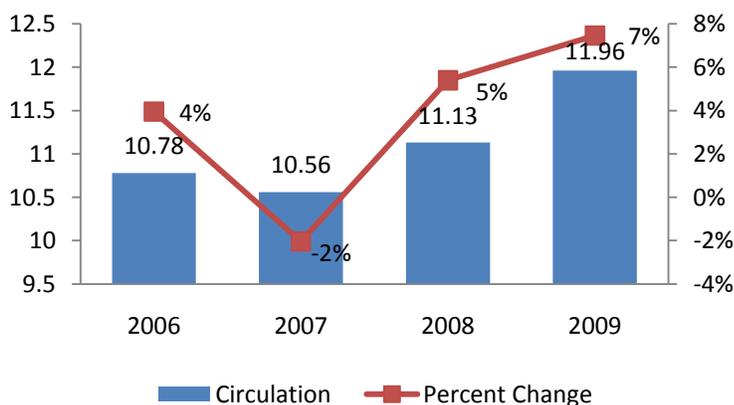
Calendar of Events
Jefferson County Public Library

These findings support the widespread belief that library visits increase during a recession. Libraries provide opportunities for people to engage in a variety of activities, such as accessing job hunting resources, attending storytime, meeting with others, and doing homework. Such offerings may have made libraries particularly appealing to the public throughout the recession.

Circulation Before and After Onset of the Recession

For some time now, public libraries have been checking out more than books. Most libraries also allow borrowers to check out magazines, audio books, DVDs of movies and TV programs, and music CDs—to name only the most popular formats. Libraries also offer access to the same types of content via download, so that there is no longer a physical object to check out.

Chart 3
Circulation Per Capita & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population



People know that libraries are free and enjoy all the free resources that we offer—magazines, newspapers, books, and DVDs.

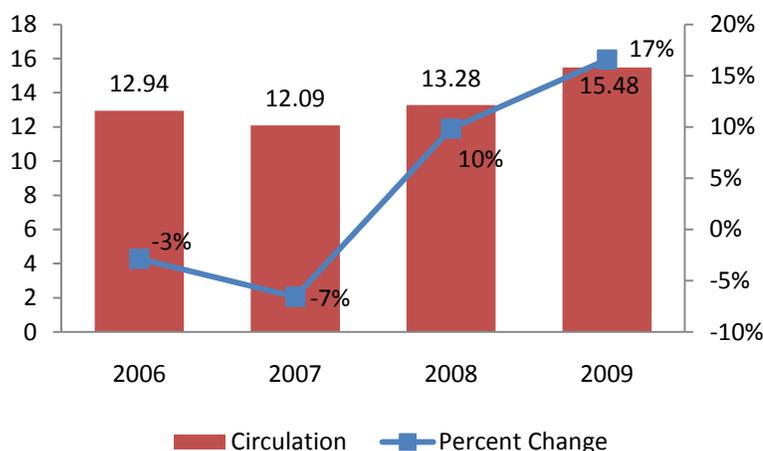
Lori Barnes, Director,
Vail Public Library

As Denverites continued to struggle during the early days of the recovery, Denver Public Library added portable Watts Up? meters to its circulating collection. Offered in partnership with Xcel Energy, these energy usage meters enable households to assess their levels of usage and learn more about the costs of energy production as well as their potential eligibility for rebates.

"Watts Up," Library News
Denver Public Library

Between 2006 and 2007—before the onset of the recession—circulation of library materials at libraries serving 25,000 or more was actually trending downward (Chart 3). Once the recession took hold in 2008, however, demand for this basic library service saw an uptick (5% over 2007), and rose by an even larger percentage in 2009 (7% over 2008). For resort libraries, during the same periods, similar patterns occurred, only more exaggerated (Chart 4). In 2007, for instance, the decline in circulation per capita was at a rate three times that of larger libraries (-7% vs. -2%). The reverse was equally true: Circulation per capita for resort libraries increased as the recession deepened at twice the rate seen for larger libraries (10% vs. 5% in 2008, 17% vs. 7% in 2009).

Chart 4
Circulation Per Capita & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Resort Libraries



When economic times get bad, people can turn to their public libraries for books, audio books, DVDs, and other resources that help them locate new jobs, explore new careers, return to school, and “get by” through economizing.

Program Attendance Before and After Onset of the Recession

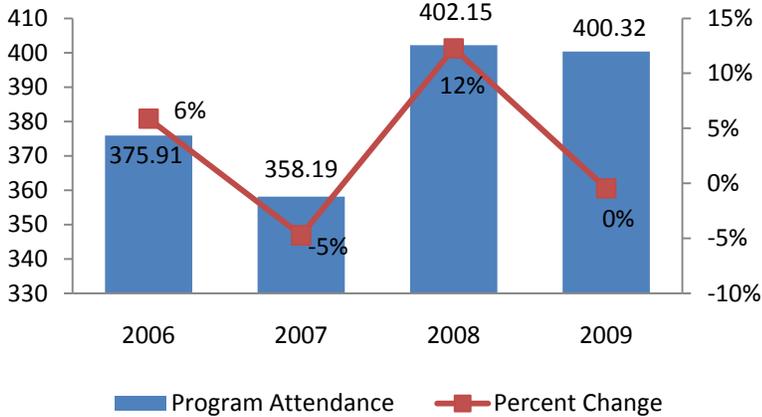
In response to our tighter budgets, we have sharply focused our programming on key audiences and themes. We do fewer programs, linked thematically, concentrated on groups that have shown an interest. Small business owners are one of those groups.

Jamie LaRue, Director
Douglas County Libraries

Public libraries offer programs and other events to help prepare preschoolers for a good start in school, support students of all ages in their studies, promote book discussions among readers, tutor new immigrants in English and prepare them for citizenship exams, provide job hunting and business development workshops, and teach life skills to interested parties.

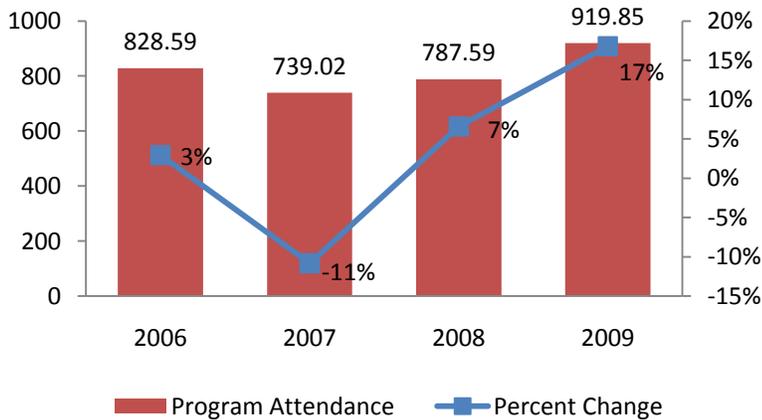
Immediately before the recession hit, program attendance per 1,000 served at libraries serving populations of 25,000 or more was trending downward (-5% from 2006 to 2007) (Chart 5). The year the recession hit, this statistic increased at a double-digit rate (12%) and maintained that higher level as the recession wore on.

Chart 5
Program Attendance Per 1,000 Served & Percent Change
From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population



As with circulation per capita, resort libraries experienced even more dramatic trends for program attendance per 1,000 served (Chart 6). Just before the recession's onset, this statistic dropped at twice the rate for larger libraries (-11% vs. -5%). As the recession settled in, program attendance per 1,000 served at resort libraries rose by 7% in 2008 and 17% in 2009.

Chart 6
Program Attendance Per 1,000 Served & Percent Change
From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Resort Libraries



People have traditionally been able to take advantage of a wide variety of programs at public libraries. When economic times are tough, they can continue to attend these programs, as well as offerings that are particularly relevant to their current situation. These may include learning opportunities and support groups that help them figure out how to save money, find new jobs, and pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. To illustrate, Shannon Smith of Anythink Libraries (Rangeview Library District) tells this story: "When I first met one customer—a young 77 years of age—she told me she had 'never touched a computer. But, I need a job, so I have to fill out an application online.' 'You'll need an email account, so you should come to my email computer class,' I suggested. It took several attempts for her to create a

We are hosting a series of career reboot programs at our libraries this year...During the four-week course, participants learn about interview preparation, negotiations, on- and off-line job searching, and interpersonal skills necessary to land a job. Beyond the searching tips and tricks, [the] workshops build self-esteem and a sense of community. These programs have been filled with people eager to gain new approaches to job searching.

Pam Sandlian Smith, Director
 Anythink Libraries
 Rangeview Library District

We have seen an increase in job-seekers visiting because they need to apply for jobs online and/or establish email accounts. We have offered more classes about how to use computers to meet patron demand.

Eve Tallman, Director
 Mesa County Library District

Our Internet usage increased significantly during this period due primarily to a large number of job seekers coming in to use our public Internet computers. We also expanded the time individuals could remain on the computers without reserving them again which greatly helped job seekers.

Roberta Depp, Director
Mamie Doud Eisenhower Public Library

A different type of clientele is using our public access computers. There are more job-seekers, who come to use the computers to look for jobs and create resumes.

Janine Reed, Director
High Plains Library District

A few months back, I had a customer in her 50s [who] asked me to help her get set-up on a computer...She seemed to be lost in the world of technology. Too old to have grown up with it, but still needing these skills to go back to school, apply for jobs, and write resumes...This story really made me think about how important we are to our communities. She had nobody to help her, but we were here.

Stephanie Douglas
Anythink Libraries
Rangeview Library District

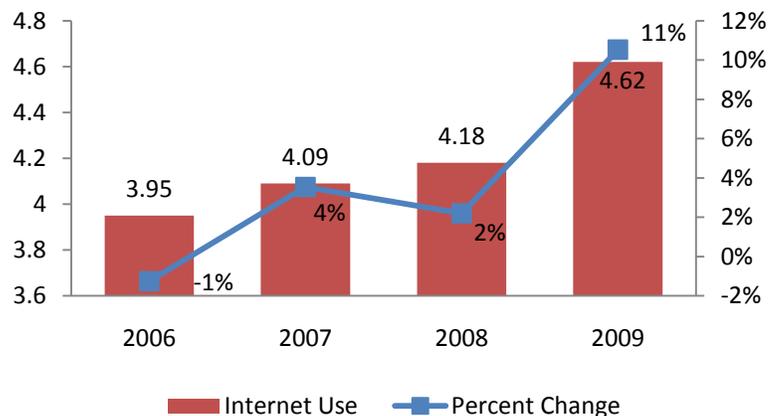
username and choose a password. [Then], she turned to me, flashed a big grin, and we did a big high-five.”

Public Internet Computer Use Before and After Onset of the Recession

The most dramatic change in public libraries over the past generation has been the advent of computers and the Internet. Information technology has revolutionized the library business, and continues to do so at a rapid rate. Public Internet computers at libraries help to bridge the “digital divide” for those who still do not have computers or high-speed Internet connections at home or in their workplaces or schools. Most public libraries provide access to a variety of comprehensive, authoritative, and expensive databases to which most community residents could never afford to subscribe to personally. While more and more library users are bringing their own laptop computers and other devices with them and using WiFi services to access such resources, many still rely on free public access computers provided by public libraries. Data on WiFi use in public libraries is not yet widely available, so this analysis focuses on the use of public Internet computers.

For the years covered in this study, comparable statistics on Internet computer use were not available from a critical mass of libraries serving populations of 25,000 or more; but such statistics were available for most of the state’s resort libraries. While Internet computer use per capita saw steady, but modest, gains from 2006 to 2008, the percentage increase in demand for these services as the recession deepened in the national psyche (2009) reached double-digit levels (Chart 7).

Chart 7
Internet Use Per Capita & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009
Resort Libraries



Public libraries have been building their computer capacity for years. Two thirds (67%) of public libraries in the United States report being the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet in their communities (Davis, Bertot, & Clark, 2010). They have also become the public’s most reliable point of access for much of the online information that is most valuable when economic times are tough. Such online publications and databases are often only available via expensive subscriptions that are

beyond the budget of the average household. At public libraries, people can not only find free access to these electronic resources, but also staff expertise to help them get the most from these sources.

Sometimes when computer resources are scarce, libraries fill in the gaps for both public and private organizations. Chris Painter of East Routt Library District cites some examples of this phenomenon: “The Colorado Workforce Center refers people to the library to use computers for job-related activities. Consumer Reports online is widely used by patrons to find economically sensible purchases. [And] yesterday, a young man asked for assistance in applying for the armed services to deal with his financial crisis and be of service...At a public computer, I helped him find the National Guard site and make contact with a representative, which he did within the hour.”

When the Denver Post eliminated the job kiosk service last year, [we] responded by creating our own site that makes the process of job searching, resume writing, and applying for unemployment benefits more accessible and hopefully less mysterious.

Pam Sandlian Smith, Director
Anythink Libraries
Rangeview Library District

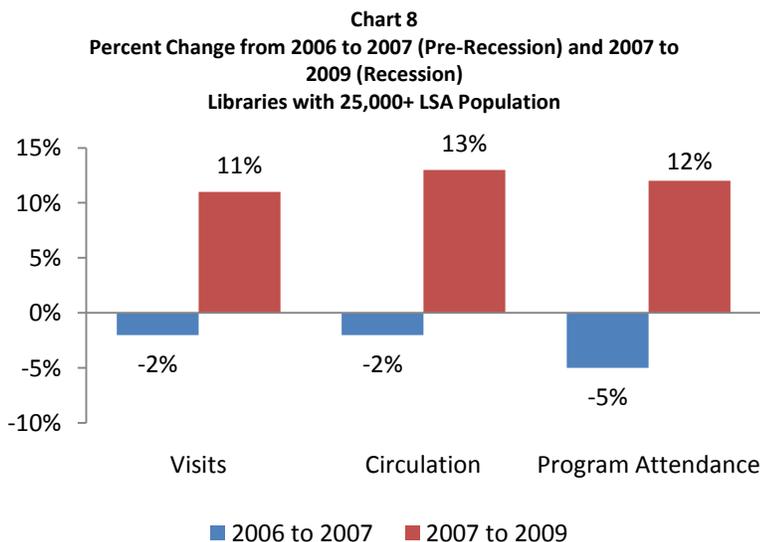
Public Library Use Before and After Onset of the Recession

The recession’s impact on public library use is illustrated most dramatically when examining the percent increase for each of the usage statistics from the year prior to the recession’s onset (2007) to the final year of the recession (2009). This may be due at least in part to the fact that Colorado entered the recession late (third quarter of 2008), as mentioned earlier. In most instances, percent increase for each of the two groups of libraries—those serving populations of 25,000 and over and those serving resort communities—was in the double digits.

We have heard patrons comment that the library is the best deal for families on a budget.

Eve Tallman, Director
Mesa County Public Library District

For libraries serving populations of 25,000 and over, visits per capita increased by 11 percent from 2007 to 2009 (Chart 8). Similar increases were seen for circulation per capita and program attendance per 1,000 served. Circulation increased by 13 percent and program attendance by 12 percent during this time period. In contrast, visits and circulation decreased by 2 percent and program attendance by 5 percent from 2006 to 2007 (just prior to the recession).



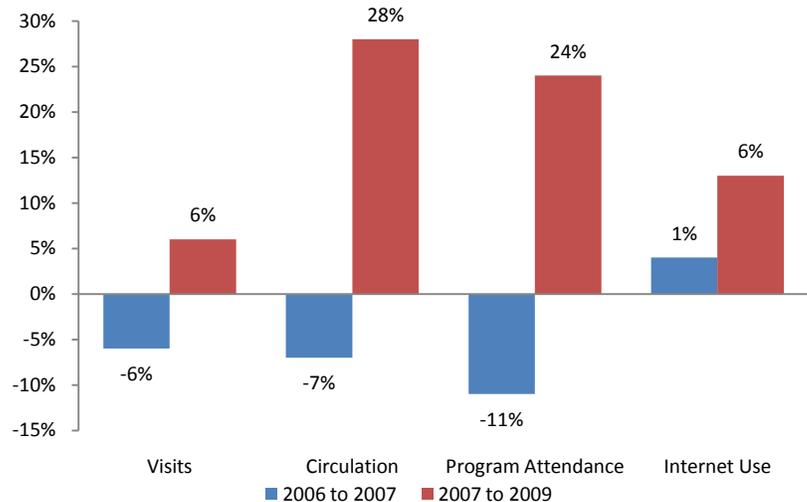
13%
Percent increase in circulation
from 2007 to 2009.
(Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population)

28%

Percent increase in circulation
from 2007 to 2009.
(Resort Libraries)

For libraries serving resort communities, visits per capita increased by 6 percent from 2007 to 2009, while circulation per capita, program attendance per 1,000 served, and Internet use per capita all had double digit percentage increases during this time period (Chart 9). Circulation increased by 28 percent, program attendance by 24 percent, and Internet computer use by 13 percent. In contrast, visits (-6%), circulation (-7%), and program attendance (-11%) all decreased during the time period just prior to the recession and Internet use remained relatively static.

Chart 9
Percent Change from 2006 to 2007 (Pre-Recession) and
2007 to 2009 (Recession)
Resort Libraries



Clearly, the recent recession had—and, due to the sluggish recovery, continues to have—a dramatic impact on public library use in Colorado. When their communities needed them most, public libraries were there to offer the space, information, and assistance Coloradans needed to cope with psychological stresses, strained family budgets, changing retirement plans, and unemployment and under-employment. In addition, Coloradans who needed it were able to take advantage of libraries' resources and programs to gain new skills to become more competitive in the job market, and to become more entrepreneurial out of sheer necessity.

As current American Library Association president Roberta Stevens (2010) concluded in a recent *Washington Post* commentary:

Here's a message to elected leaders as they balance budgets: Today's libraries are ["a strategic investment." They are] an essential service and provide resources to ensure a competitive workforce. All of us—parents, families, seniors and businesses large or small—must speak up to keep libraries open and available...The resources in your local library have the power to change the world; but the doors must be kept open.

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Appendix: Sources for Web Site Quotes

Note: Although most quotes in this report were obtained via phone or email communication with library directors and staff, the following were taken from library web sites:

Denver Public Library, “Watts Up,” <http://denverlibrary.org/content/watts>

Durango Public Library, Business Information Resources @ Your Library, <http://www.durangopubliclibrary.org/screens/busplan.html>

Jefferson County Public Library Calendar Events, <http://www.eventkeeper.com/code/events.cfm?curOrg=JCPL&curKey2=Adult&setRef=new>

Miller, Paula J. Executive Director, Pikes Peak Library District, “About the Library,” <http://library.ppld.org/about-the-library>

ⁱ The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research organization whose aim is to promote a better understanding of how the economy works. It conducts and disseminates unbiased economic research among public policymakers, business professionals, and the academic community.

ⁱⁱ A library is classified as a “resort library” if it meets one of the following criteria:

- The library is located in a county that has 20% or more employment in the “arts, entertainment, recreation, lodging, and food services” as reported in the 2000 Census; or
- The library is located in a county whose largest city has 20% or more employment in the “arts, entertainment, recreation, lodging, and food services” as reported in the 2000 Census.