From the Pen of the Editor
Ralph Scott

Budget Woes

Libraries again face a current budget shortfall. University of North Carolina system libraries expect an up to 30% decline in state support. State aid to public libraries has been reduced by ten percent. Friends groups report lower donation levels. At the same time libraries currently are experiencing record growth in patron demand of their collections and facilities. According to the American Library Association, Americans check out more than two billion items in public libraries, borrow DVDs, check out employment opportunities, learn new computer skills in classes, and participate in community activities. The average annual cost of these services runs $31 per taxpayer. Almost 75 percent of libraries report that librarians instruct patrons in job searches, technology training, applying for and understanding government services such as Medicare and unemployment benefits. Sixty-six percent of households with children under 18 used a public library in the past year. Steven James posited the "librarians' axiom" that "public libraries prosper whenever the country is experiencing economic stringency." James noted in his 1986 article in *Public Library Quarterly* that he has observed an over one hundred year history for this trend. William Poole first noticed this effect in his 1880 annual report of the Chicago Public Library. Beverly Lynch noted this trend again in the mild 2002 economic downturn, and the 2008-2009 downturn has seen libraries in North Carolina packed to the rafters.

In past recessions, libraries have proven an easy target for budget reduction. Branches have been closed down, and book/periodical purchases curtailed. While libraries offer convenient short-term solutions to budget shortfalls, in the end the taxpaying public is only hurt by these decisions. This should be a time we keep our doors open as much as possible, our shelves stocked with new titles, and our reading rooms filled with patrons using the Internet. Free municipal wireless is growing, but the installed base is still somewhat small and probably will not grow much in this economic climate, and libraries provide a safe place for citizens with limited funds to access the Internet. North Carolina's economy may not be great right now, but let's keep our doors open to those who need us most. When the current economic crisis end, I believe these library users will remember the kindness we have shown them in their time of greatest need.

Letters to the editor should be addressed to the editor and sent to Joyner Library, East Fifth Street, Greenville, NC 27858, or by electronic mail (scottr@ecu.edu). We reserve the right to edit all submissions. If you are interested in writing for *North Carolina Libraries* or would like consideration for news and product information, please send brief information to the editor at the above address.