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PRIVATE HELP FOR BALTIMORE'S STRUGGLING LIBRARIES?

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The neighborhood library is one of the leading indicators of a community's health, especially in urban areas. That should trouble the citizens of Baltimore, where five of the 26 branches of the venerable Enoch Pratt Library were closed last year, and five more could close by 2006.

The reason for the closings is the same problem that threatens library systems nationwide: budget shortfalls that produce a decline in hours of service, reductions in book and equipment purchases, and deferral of building renovations.

Fortunately, some libraries are successfully combating their budget woes by tapping the management expertise of private business. And one of the leaders in providing that expertise is based right here in Maryland: Library Systems and Services Incorporated (LSSI) in Germantown.

LSSI entered the library business more than 20 years ago, when it began managing federal libraries in the wake of federal budget cuts. Soon, the company's list of clients came to include such prestigious facilities as the Department of Energy and the Smithsonian.

In the mid-1990s, the company decided to expand its services to include corporate, academic and public libraries. They began marketing their services in 1997, and by July of that year they were running the Riverside County Library System in California.

In theory, managing Riverside's public libraries, which include 25 branches in 15 different municipalities, should be no easy task. Since LSSI took over, however, the results speak for themselves: the company has almost doubled Riverside's weekly hours of operation, replaced or remodeled several older buildings, increased the staff by 57 percent, and increased the money allocated for new books by a whopping 250 percent. But here's the kicker: Before LSSI took over, the operating budget for the Riverside County Library System was \$6.3 million; the first year of LSSI's contract (1997), it was \$5.4 million; last year total spending was only \$6.3 million. That's a lot more bang for the tax buck. (Prior to the closings last year, Baltimore's library system had a \$27 million budget).

To understand what LSSI did and how it benefits the Riverside community, it's important to understand what the company did not do. It did not buy the library system or its books. It did not alter library policy. Instead, the company provides

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no-nonsense, business-like management that is unencumbered by the byzantine procedures, regulations, and political machinations that accompany government oversight. Such efficiency is vitally necessary for public libraries because popularity among users translates to higher costs with little additional revenues.

LSSI also managed to cut costs by converting Riverside's workforce – which had been unionized county and city workers – to a private workforce. As part of the transformation, the company shed the expenses that accompany such a workforce, but it did not in turn lose the libraries' experienced and qualified staff – LSSI retained some 90 percent of the inherited employees.

Baltimore, which historically has shown strong union loyalty, understandably would be concerned about conversion of the city's library staffers to private employees. But that concern is dwarfed by the larger concerns that surround Enoch Pratt's struggles.

Would Baltimore be willing to hand over its libraries to private management? There is reason to think so. In 1997, the city chose to turn over management of a Roland Park library building that was threatened with closure to a private non-profit group. Today, the Roland Park group is moving forward with plans to expand the rejuvenated library, thanks to community fundraising and other efforts led by the town's former mayor.

While the Roland Park solution isn't as radical as recruiting a private company to manage the city's libraries, it shows that Baltimore is open to innovative solutions and public-private partnerships to preserve and advance one of their most valued institutions. Such creative thinking is sorely needed, given both Enoch Pratt's tremendous importance to the people of Baltimore and its very difficult financial situation.

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