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Newsletter of the Australian Library & Information Association

The state of public library funding in Victoria

While the funding of public libraries has remained a controversial issue, it has assumed a new dimension in Victoria with the government decision to defer the payment of the 1990-91 Public Library Grant until July 1991. An additional 6.5 per cent was offered to compensate for the effect of the deferred payment. While the 1990-91 subsidy offer was equivalent to 1989-90 in dollars, it did represent a decrease in real terms.

Both the reduced overall level of funding and the deferred payment have resulted in a range of serious consequences for public libraries in Victoria. The reduced quantum of funds has directly led to reduced opening hours in some libraries (West Gippsland Regional Library, Yarra Plenty Regional Library) and in the case of West Gippsland Regional Library each branch was closed for 2 weeks during the year with reductions in the working hours of some full-time and part-time staff.

At Corangamite Regional Library, the reduced level of State funding, combined with the decisions of some member councils to marginally increase their contributions, has resulted in the discontinuation of one bookmobile service, drastically reduced purchases of new books and periodicals, staff reductions, opening hours reductions and the closure of small branch libraries for the whole of January 1991.

The deferred payment has resulted in the postponement or suspension of book purchasing in some libraries. In the case of Williamstown Library, Council limited book purchases to 42 per cent of its total allocated budget until the subsidy is actually received. In the case of North Central Goldfields Regional Library, previously allocated book funds were diverted to cover staff salaries and

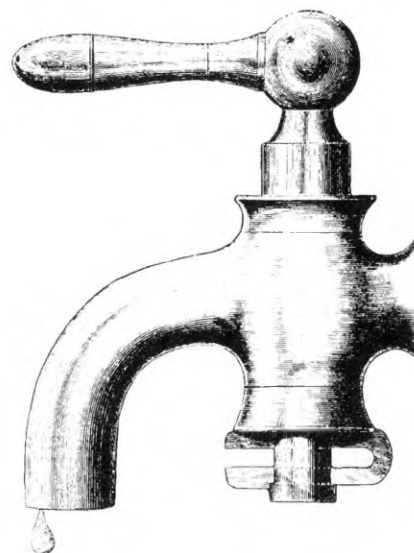
by *Bernard Hawke*

Williamstown City Librarian

operating expenses, with the intention of recommencing book purchases when the subsidy is received. In other country regional libraries, the bank overdrafts have increased to undesirable levels, with member councils being asked to contribute earlier than before. Increasingly the financial burden is borne by local government which is expected to make up the shortfall if service levels are to be maintained.

The flow-on effect of these reductions to library suppliers is also being felt, with one established Victorian library supplier significantly scaling down its operations during 1991 and other suppliers of furniture, equipment and capital improvements experiencing the consequences of reduced library expenditure.

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The book budgets of many Melbourne metropolitan library services have not been reduced significantly, with councils accepting the State Government assurances that the subsidy will be paid in July. The impact of any future subsidy reductions is difficult to estimate but will most certainly make it even more difficult for libraries to maintain services, opening hours and new materials acquisition levels.

Although the discussion continues on the composition of the funding formula, the combined effects of reduced and deferred subsidies to public libraries has seriously affected Victorian public libraries at a time when user demand has significantly increased. The increased level of unemployment and increased research demands of the new VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) have both contributed to increased public library usage in Victoria. □

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