

LIBRARY LOOKS TO STEM LOSSES AT BLENDER CAFE

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BELOIT - The Beloit Public Library is looking for ways to stem consecutive losses with the Blender Cafe educational venture one year into operations.

The library's budget committee met Tuesday afternoon as library administration presented the first look ahead into 2019.

In June of last year the library and multiple groups launched the Blender Cafe, a space aimed at giving Beloit Memorial High School students interested in culinary and hospitality fields first-hand job experience.

The effort was funded by multiple private backers, providing \$267,000 for the first year of operations. Library Director Nick Dimassis said that rather than funding the cafe with revenue in a typical business model, the library will seek grant funding and other private means to make ends meet after sustained losses following the cafe's opening.

Currently, two managers and eight students work at the cafe, with the plan for next year slashing the total staff to one manager and three student positions, cutting the cafe's budget by over 50 percent from \$267,000 to \$109,000.

Under the new plan the cafe would be expected to break even, but might still need some outside funding at times.

No tax revenue had been used towards the cafe's operating budget, and the year's differential had been covered with the private funding, Dimassis said.

Construction of the cafe which converted the library's preschool area and programming room cost \$208,354, and was funded in part by \$100,000 in a capital improvement bond from 2016, along with the library's foundation providing \$108,354, according to city records.

The library will apply for a state workforce development grant, with the cafe's operations to be addressed again in early 2019. The library would hear back on the state grant in December, Dimassis said.

"We need to commit to making it work whatever way we can, and preserving those initial investments," said committee member Marty Densch. "A bold proposal has been laid out in front of us and it has a much better chance of success than where we are sitting right now. These numbers are certainly doable."

The full library board will be briefed on the Blender Cafe overhaul in two weeks at the regular board meeting.

Overall, the library's budget is anticipated to decrease about \$98,546 from this year to a total budget of \$2.26 million. To balance next year's budget the library anticipates spending \$114,968 in reserve funds, something not done in this year's budget.

Since 2012, the library's main source of funding, city tax revenue, has increased by around \$5,000, with around \$1.78 million expected for next year. Dimassis said he will meet with city administrative staff next month to discuss next year's library budget.

"This is truly a preliminary budget and it could change as we move through the process," he told committee members Tuesday afternoon.

Looking ahead to next year, the library will look to boost its English as a second language program, determine the scope of a potential partnership with Blackhawk Technical College to possibly offer four classes at the library and revamp the School District of Beloit partnership with the Blender Cafe.