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**Title: On the books, an embarrassment of riches -**  
**A tax law overfunds some N.J. libraries even as others struggle.**  
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The summer lineup at the public library in this high-end Jersey Shore town reads like a Kimmel Center glossy:

"Ballroom Dancing Class for Children - Ages 7 and Up"

"Author - **Sara Paretsky**"

"The Bay-Atlantic Symphony Beethoven **Bash** Concert"

The dry-mounted, foam-backed event posters alone cost more than library director Norman Gluckman ever spent on literacy tutors at his old gig in down-on-its-luck Millville, 40 miles inland. It's the kind of cash flow that could make a poor-town librarian cry.

"We have a very robust summer program," he said, perhaps unaware of the understatement of Avalon's good fortune.

And yet town leaders here and in neighboring Ocean City are singing the blues precisely because their libraries are in the black. They say the extravagant Shore real estate market, combined with an age-old state law requiring that a fixed percentage of local taxes go to libraries, has created piles of unspendable cash.

They want policy makers in Trenton to tweak the regulations of the law - regarded by some as one of the nation's most progressive - so that they can transfer surplus bucks away from books and onto the municipal ledger.

"You're raising more than you need," Avalon business administrator Andy Bednarek said. The value of taxable real estate here has tripled to \$8.6 billion since 2004.

As a result, Avalon will collect \$13.3 million in property taxes this year - \$2.3 million of which will go to the library.

In Ocean City, where taxable real estate is at \$13 billion, officials estimate a library surplus of more than \$4 million. After some is set aside for a planned library expansion, the town would like state permission to give back what's left to taxpayers, Mayor Sal Perillo said.

"We need to have a mechanism to have the surplus beyond that amount to be returned to the municipality," said Perillo, who has been at the table with state officials, library and municipal lobbyists, and Avalon officials since January.

The law requires that one-third of a mill of real estate taxes, or \$33 on a \$100,000 home, be set aside for the library.

State Librarian Norma Blake supports a compromise in the rules for Shore towns, but she and library advocates across New Jersey warn: Even one loophole could weaken the 120-year-old law, which has been a beacon to library advocates nationwide.

The law has long been in the sights of penny-wise local politicians because it prohibits them from doing what is common in places like Philadelphia: slashing library budgets to pay for fire trucks, potholes and patronage perks.

"This is a fail-safe," Blake said.

But even the most well-meaning and enduring law can end up doing strange things.

Just take Norman Gluckman's ride from Millville to Avalon and see for yourself.

Millville

Miles of farms and pine groves turned to specks in the rearview mirror last summer as Gluckman's gray Toyota throttled toward the Atlantic coast and his new job as director of the Avalon Free Public Library.

Thoughts of hardscrabble Millville faded as Avalon came into view. The used-up glass factory, the sputtering aeronautics plant, the bicycles stolen from children at the library where he used to be in charge - all of that was history.

And then reality hit like a gold-plated hammer.

"It was like landing on Mars," Gluckman said. "I went from scarcity to unbelievable wealth that was really difficult to get my hands around."

In Millville, an industrial nucleus of rural Cumberland County, Gluckman had \$600,000 a year to serve 27,000 people.

The city, due west of Atlantic City, has relatively high poverty and unemployment and low literacy rates.

The library is neatly stuffed into a squat cube of yellow bricks. Nearby, the marquee of the boarded-up Levoy Theatre declares the week's big event: "Happy Birthday George Kracke."

After rent, salaries and building expenses, Gluckman had about \$50,000 for books, CDs and computers, and \$1,000 for programs. In Avalon, he has \$130,000 a year just for programs.

"Usually during library week we might have a speaker, but we just don't have the money for it," said Mary Jane Shipman, the Millville library's adult-services coordinator.

With 57,000 holdings and eight computers, the library has a meager 1.76 volumes per Millville resident - well below the 6.05 in Ocean City and the 6.72 in Haddonfield, said Patricia Tumulty, executive director of the New Jersey Library Association.

#### Avalon

There is a decidedly Zen vibe in the cavernous new building that houses the Avalon library.

Sunlight gushes through high windows. Vacationers tap earnestly on sleek laptops sucking up free wireless. There are dozens of free PCs.

For a town with a year-round population of 2,500, there are 42,000 holdings. That includes a new batch of Playaway digital audio books.

Gluckman marveled at the contrast to Millville.

"Here was a new library, the roof wasn't leaking, there wasn't any mold, I wouldn't have to clean the bathrooms when the part-time janitor wasn't there," he said.

#### Ocean City

The colorful bindings of hardcover best-sellers invite patrons toward the stacks at Ocean City's library like crayons in a super-size pack.

In this two-story library, 25 personal computers and 30 of the latest Harry Potter books in hardback can be found. Millville has six - two of them donated.

There are 100,000 volumes for 12,300 year-round residents.

"We had Gidget here in the lobby," library director Christopher Maloney noted of a recent guest speaker.

An alumnus of the struggling Pennsauken Free Public Library, Maloney said he believed the law did more good than harm, even if it led to inequities. Not so, he said, with a bill introduced by Assemblyman Paul Moriarty, the mayor of Washington Township.

Moriarty wants to be able to redirect some of his town's \$800,000 in library savings toward municipal tax relief.

"We need to find a way of getting some of that money out without harming the libraries," the Democrat has said.

All of this may soon become a moot point, given the real estate slowdown. Blake said the surplus anomaly came around every decade or so as real estate boomed. It dissipates as the market contracts.

The New Jersey State League of Municipalities intends to continue advocating for a change next month.

That is because library funding is becoming more important to towns in light of new state restrictions (a 4 percent annual cap) on how much they can raise property taxes, executive director William Dressel Jr. said.

Towns that collect more in library taxes will have less wiggle room to raise taxes for other expenses without exceeding the cap, he said. Library revenues fall under the cap.

But apart from that fiscal pressure point, the issue of the surpluses deserves attention, he said.

"Some of these towns, their library systems cannot possibly spend the amount of money they're collecting."

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Caption:

PHOTO

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TOM GRALISH / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Avalon Free Public Library director Norman Gluckman with a page-turner. A law mandating a percentage of taxes for libraries has some towns wanting a share of surpluses.

Sam Malloy, 4, of West Chester, gets in some serious reading while father Terry takes a look into the Wall Street Journal at the Avalon Free Public Library.

TOM GRALISH / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Matthew Kennedy, 10, of Sea Isle City, curls up with a book next to his teacher, Christina Kupcinski, at Avalon's library.

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