

Thoughts about Public Library Systems II

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I've spent many years working in public library systems and have come to know them intimately. In the next few issues of Trustee Tale, I'll be sharing some of my reflections on systems in the hope that public library trustees can gain a better understanding and appreciation systems and how they relate to local libraries. I want to start by reflecting on the structure of systems and the tensions created by that structure.

I'm always surprised that 35 years after systems were originally enabled in Wisconsin there are still those in the library community questioning whether the state's library system program is an equalization program. In my opinion, the Wisconsin Public Library System program is clearly an equalization program. There isn't any reason for the state to be involved in library service except to equalize opportunity for all state residents.

When systems were created, it was the intent of the Legislature that state aid funds be used by systems "to coordinate and supplement library resources and services beyond what could be provided at the local and county levels (Legislative Audit Bureau 1988)." Clearly, the public library system program was designed to equalize the opportunity for all state residents to enjoy a reasonable level of public library service. Equalization of opportunity is the primary reason, if not the only reason, the state is involved in all kinds of activities or programs.

The general rule for equalization programs is that state funds are collected via a statewide tax and distributed to localities on some basis (not related to the way funds are collected). Public library system aids follow this rule. They come from state funds generated by the income tax, and they are distributed using a formula that considers population, area, and local expenditures. As with other state equalization programs, public library system aids are not intended or expected to be returned to the localities responsible for generating them.

If state aids were always returned to localities in the amounts generated by those localities, there would be no reason for the state to be involved. There is no reason for the state to collect money and return it to where it came from. This could be done more efficiently at the local level.

I'm a firm believer that every public library needs to regularly assess whether the benefits of system membership are greater than the responsibilities and obligations that come with membership. If the benefits don't outweigh the obligations then there is a problem that needs to be addressed. While a discussion of how to compare benefits and obligations is beyond the scope of this essay, because the public library system program is an equalization program it is not appropriate for any library to focus on the amount of state aid it generates for the system in making this comparison.

A Trustee's Basic Seven

Every public library trustee should be able to answer a few basic questions about his or her library at any time, whether over the produce at the grocery, socializing after church, or called to task by an upset citizen. Seven very basic things to know are:

1. **Hours of operation**
2. **Budget**
3. **Upcoming programs**
4. **Location(s)**
5. **Phone number(s)**
6. **Web address**
7. **Mission or purpose for being**

Number two, budget, refers to the current year's operating account and does not mean the trustee should be able to recite the entire budget—just know approximately how much income the library is expecting to collect and spend during the fiscal year.

The last item, far from the least, also does not mean one is able to recite, word for word, the official mission statement, but should be able to say, in his or her own words, why the community has a public library. What is it there to do? Why should we care that we have one?

Mission statements aren't new; the Library of Alexandria in ancient Egypt had a mission statement: to acquire a copy of every "book" extant.

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While that may be too ambitious for your library, the mission of the Evanston (IL) Public Library “is to promote the development of independent, self confident, and literate citizens through the provision of open access to cultural, intellectual, and informational resources” and that may be attainable, in some degree, by most any library worthy of the name.

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