

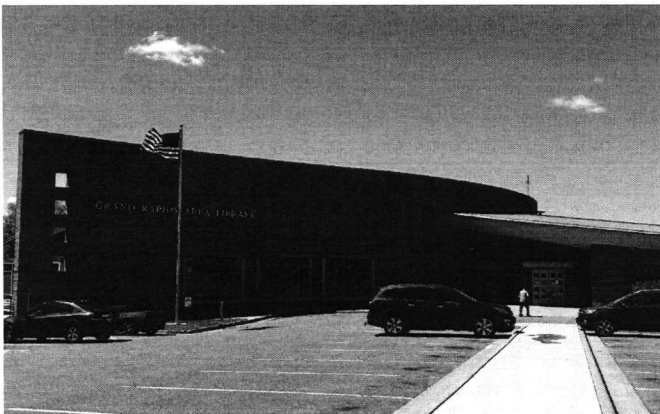
Future of Grand Rapids library unclear as city, county talk funding

KAXE | By Megan Buffington

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The Grand Rapids Area Library on May 22, 2025.

The Grand Rapids Area Library is the busiest in Itasca County. But the city wants a more equitable funding agreement with the county, and cuts could be on the horizon if an agreement isn't reached.

GRAND RAPIDS — By Director of Library Services Will Richter's "back-of-the-envelope" calculations, the Grand Rapids Area Library could be open just one day a week next year.

That's if the city makes cuts to the library budget without a new funding agreement[†]

Richter's early estimation is based on the worst-case scenario: Grand Rapids drops its contribution to the legal minimum, after providing far more than required for years.

"That's a very drastic cut in our overall budget, and it would have a significant impact," Richter said.

"The joint powers [agreement] is a potential solution to this issue. After we present that to the County Board, it becomes something that our elected officials can hopefully cooperate on for the benefit of residents in the county."

Richter and Grand Rapids Mayor Tasha Connelly will present a joint power agreement to the Board on May 27, asking for the county and city to shoulder an equal share of library funding.

Richter said the presentation will be informational, and the county generally crafts its budget over the summer.

"Perhaps we'll learn more at the meeting on the 27th, there would be some feedback on what their timeline for weighing this is, because certainly that would be very good information for the city council to have and community residents to have," Richter said.

A library poster asks residents to show their support by attending the Board meeting. It also highlights one of the major drivers behind the proposal: Grand Rapids residents make up 37.5% of library checkouts, but the city funds 84% of the budget.

'The busiest library'

Grand Rapids has been interested in more equitable funding since Richter became library director in 2019, he said.

The city can no longer afford to maintain its level of support for the library — \$750,000 in 2023. The county levied \$392,000 for libraries, but only \$140,000 of that went to GRAL. The rest went to the broader Arrowhead Library System.

After several years of examination, Richter landed on the joint powers agreement as a viable solution, based on a similar deal between Grand Marais and Cook County.

Megan Buffington / KAXE

Will Richter, director of library services for Grand Rapids Area Library, at the May 14, 2025, meeting of the Grand Rapids Area Library Board.

“While not exact, it seems to fit our situation well, especially when you look at the use statistics, city versus county,” Richter said.

GRAL is the busiest library in the region, except Duluth. Though there are six libraries in Itasca County, 75% of transactions take place in Grand Rapids. Almost half of the library’s checkouts come from county residents outside of Grand Rapids, “a long-term pattern going back decades.”

Most can understand paying for what you get, Richter told the nine-member Grand Rapids Area Library Board at its May 14 meeting, and the joint powers agreement is a commonsense path to a solution.

“We got a local issue, local dollars that are funding, and as library director, I am proposing a local solution,” Richter said. “So, we’ll be approaching the Board in the spirit of cooperation and see where that leads to.”

The city and county have had two meetings so far to discuss the topic. Itasca County commissioners Larry Hopkins and Terry Snyder urged the public to be patient at the

Contributed / ICTV

Itasca County Board Chair Casey Venema speaks at the Board's May 13, 2025, meeting.

"There will be a lot of discussion to come on it, and certainly, we'll reach out to the public and we want to hear from you, too," Snyder said.

"I think this has been blown way out of proportion," Board Chair Casey Venema said. "I think that there's lots of discussion that has to happen, and by no means is the county cutting anything, we never said we were, [we] never were a part of it. I think that everybody is in support of the libraries, and we have more than one in Itasca County. There's several others that are busy, too."

Richter has had productive conversations with the commissioners, who he says are engaged on the topic.

"It's the busiest library in the county. It's the busiest library across our part of the state. It does have some significance regionally."

Grand Rapids Area Library busiest in Itasca County

GRAL is the clear leader in circulation or the number of checkouts.

Bovey Calumet Coleraine Grand Rapids Keewatin Marble

Source: Minnesota Department of Education • Megan Buffington / KAXE
2023 data, most recent available

* A Flourish chart

'What should local support for libraries look like?'

The city/county funding mismatch is partially the result of a change to Minnesota's Maintenance of Effort rules, which determine the minimum tax dollars that have to be distributed to the library, among other things.

This amount used to increase regularly, helping the library keep up with costs and inflation. But during the 2011 legislative session, the statute changed. The Legislature chopped 10% off the 2011 requirement and froze it. The amount hasn't gone up since.

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Libraries are a county-mandated service in Minnesota, and the vast majority of funding is local, with the state also providing funding for library systems.

“We have had conversations on our legislative platform throughout the years to say, ‘What does it look like to have a conversation around Maintenance of Effort, and what should local support for public libraries look like?’” said Sarah Hawkins, Minnesota Library Association legislative chair.

“Within our organization, representing libraries in all corners of the state, we need to be sure that what we are proposing is reflective of what’s best for all libraries.”

Hawkins and Richter said rural libraries were more affected by the change, and Hawkins said they hear about the issue more from libraries in federated systems, like Grand Rapids.

In federated systems, like the Arrowhead Library System, each library is an independent member of the system. The other library systems in Northern Minnesota — Northwest, Lake Agassiz, Kitchigami and East Central — are consolidated, meaning the local libraries are branches of the regional library.

The library association had a huge win in 2023, Hawkins said, with changes to the state library funding formula. But consolidated libraries will benefit more, because state funds are sent to library systems.

“I firmly believe that [Grand Rapids library funding] is sort of a local problem that needs to find a local solution,” Hawkins said, noting the library community is happy to support GRAL and the Arrowhead system.

“As an outsider to this specific community, it seems like a good opportunity for Grand Rapids and the county to really explore a partnership to see what library service they want to provide for their community.”