

A Big Ask during Tough Times: Grand Rapids Area Library seeks partnership with Itasca County

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Contributor*

The Itasca County Commissioner chambers and downstairs hallway were packed to stifling warmth, with over 300 residents attending the May 27th county board meeting to hear agenda topic number five: an operations report presented by Grand Rapids Area Library Director Wil Richter.

Grand Rapids Mayor Tasha Connelly and Richter gave a presentation to the Itasca County Board of Commissioners requesting that the county become a partner in a joint powers operational agreement for the Grand Rapids Area Library (GRAL). The imbalance in a financial struggle has been over two decades in the making since the new build riverfront library replaced the old downtown library. The new build brought added regional services, bigger spaces, more community use features, and an amazing atmosphere for public library users. It also brought bigger expenses.

Itasca County has six libraries serving as part of the Arrowhead Library System (See: alslib.info).

providing a levy tax resource to all Itasca County libraries served by the ALS. The request for a joint-power partnership was presented to the board and citizens in attendance through multiple slide presentations and fact graphics. The GRAL user numbers are 37.5% for Grand Rapids, 49% for Itasca County (non-GR residents), and 13.5% regional. The GRAL is the busiest library in NE Minnesota outside of Duluth.

The City of Grand Rapids is asking the taxpayers of Itasca County via the Itasca County Commissioner Board to consider an equitable partnership based on geographical usership. The mayor presented a letter to the commissioner board that stated Grand Rapids has "reached a critical funding juncture" where it can no longer be the majority stakeholder without drastic cuts in staff and services to the Itasca County area region. Richter provided a line-item proposed tax sheet based on market-value properties in Itasca County. A house valued at \$250,000 would be asked to support a \$11.06 increase in property taxes.

The public libraries that participate with the ALS are GRAL, Coleraine, Bovey, Marble, Keewatin, and Calumet. The Arrowhead Library System is a regional and multi-type system that facilitates cooperation between academic, public, school, and special libraries. 75% of library transactions occur at GRAL with a circulation of 168,165 (2023). The other circulations are:

Bovey - 3003

Calumet - 8,192

Coleraine - 37,891 (Coleraine also serves as the school library)

Keewatin - 3,782

Marble - 4,871

The Grand Rapids Area Library provides 52 programs with 2,141 attendees. The City of Grand Rapids pays 84% (\$830,187) of the cost of the GRAL, while Itasca County provides 16% (\$145,000). Itasca County pays into the Arrowhead Library System,

the GRAL and Itasca County would provide a formal contract that allows the two entities to collaborate and share resources to provide services or perform tasks that neither could do independently. Mayor Connelly used the Grand Rapids/Itasca County Airport and the Grand Rapids Animal Control Facility as cooperative examples of an effective joint powers arrangement.

The request is not asking for county commissioners and/or county residents to pick between area libraries or reduce any tax monies for the smaller libraries. The City is asking for the County to consider an equitable plan before it exhausts all options forcing draconian measures by drastic cuts to the largest library in the county. This is a decision that rests with the taxpayers of Itasca County and the Commissioners that represent them.

Vacation Bible School at Cloverdale Mennonite Church

16867 Creek Road, Nashwauk

June 9-13 • 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM

All children ages 4-15

More information:

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