

Itasca County still exploring options for Grand Rapids library funding

KAXE | By Megan Buffington

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Published June 17, 2025 at 3:21 PM CDT

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Lorie Shaul / Special To KAXE

The Grand Rapids Area Library features a large chickadee mural on the outside.

The city and county are still in the early stages of crafting their budgets, so the extent of cuts remains unclear.

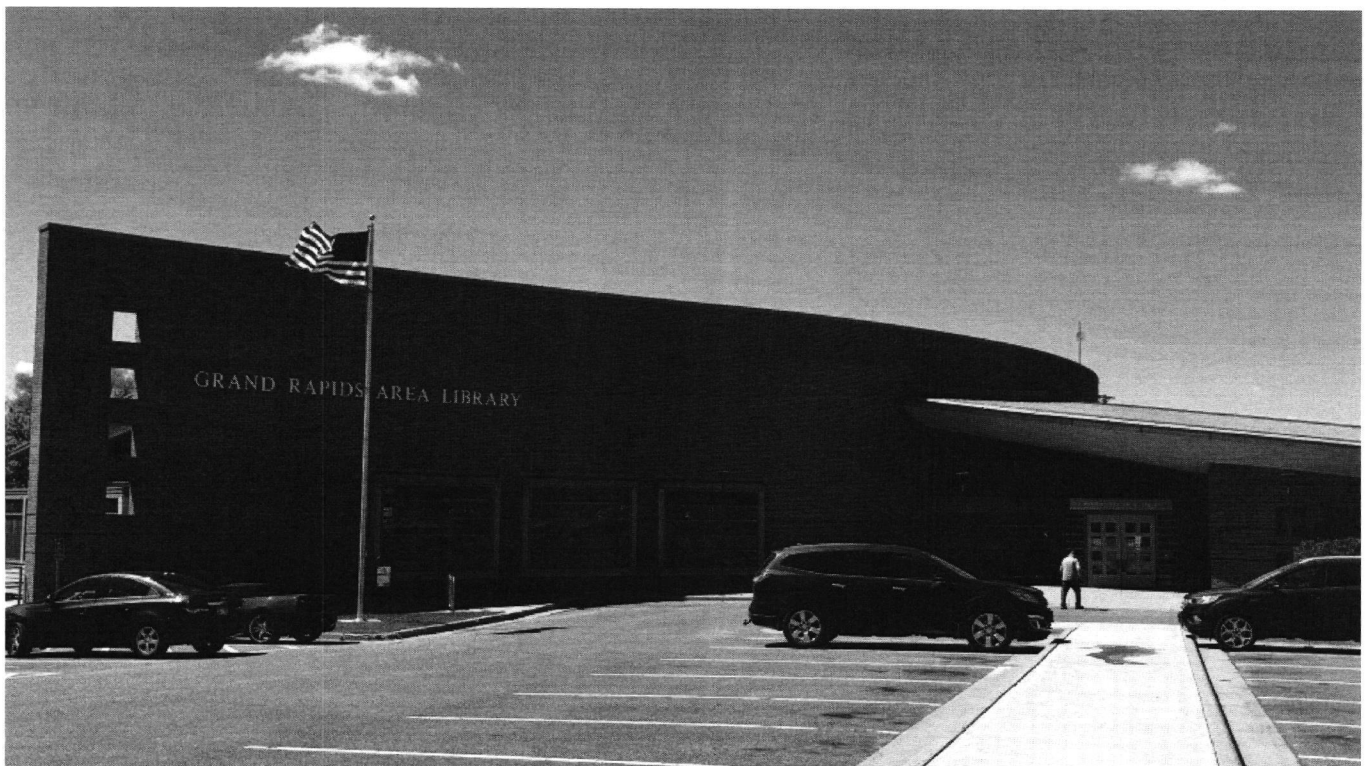
GRAND RAPIDS — There's been little news on the future of the Grand Rapids Area Library since hundreds of supporters packed the Itasca County Board Room on May 27.

The city of Grand Rapids is asking for a new funding agreement with the county that would split library funding evenly. Grand Rapids funds 84% of the library budget, but less than half of the use is from city residents

Tanika Charles - Persons To Stay

Mayor Tasha Connelly told KAXE a week after the meeting that the city hadn't yet heard from the county — but they didn't expect to. Both the city and the county are in the early stages of crafting their budgets.

The two meet at least four times a year for cooperative meetings and have talked about library funding in the past, but Connelly said with rising costs, the city decided it was time for more serious discussions. They know they'll need to cut library funding in some way.



Megan Buffington / KAXE

Local News

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

Megan Buffington, May 22, 2025

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isn't reached.

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In a "worst-case scenario," library hours would be reduced to one or two days a week, she said, but the city is just starting to run projections.

"I'm very optimistic we can figure something out, even if it's gradual or if it's moving toward 50/50," Connelly said.

A dozen residents of all ages, including educators and parents, told the County Board last month about the impact of libraries on communities and the role the Grand Rapids Area Library plays in their lives. Hundreds more did not speak but attended the meeting in support of the library, with attendees spilling into the hallway due to a lack of space.

"It was a beautiful, wonderful place, and I would be so sad to see it go," said Grand Rapids resident Tara Huotari, who spoke at her daughters' insistence. "In my kids' elementaries, the librarians got taken away, and that really saddened us quite a bit. But I knew my kids were going to be okay because we have the public library, and I could take them there."

Just one person spoke in opposition to the library's cause at the May 27 meeting, but Board Chair Casey Venema, who represents northeastern Itasca County, said more opponents have reached out to him since.

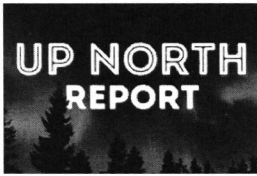
"I'm starting to hear the other side of the coin, the people outside the area that are concerned about their taxes going up," Venema said at the Board's June 10 meeting. "So, we will continue, speaking for myself, to keep digging in and figuring out what the issue is with it and what can be done."

'As strong as they can be'

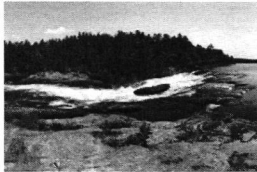
Mollie Stanford, Arrowhead Library Service director, gave an informational presentation about the regional library system to the Board at its June 10 meeting. Itasca County's six libraries are ALS members.

There was initially concern that more county funding for the Grand Rapids Area Library would come at the expense of ALS, but the county has assured that any additional funding would not come at the other libraries' expense, according to Coleraine Library

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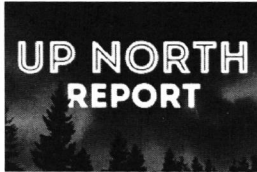
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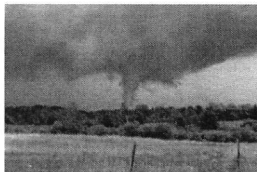
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"Funding is not unlimited and tough choices have to be made," said a written statement Stanford read at the meeting. "We remain a valuable, necessary library resource for many folks who do not have the capacity to visit a public library daily, weekly, monthly, or possibly ever due to extreme barriers."

ALS operates the Bookmobile and Mail-A-Book and provides additional support to member libraries, like automation and inter-library delivery.

The Grand Rapids Area Library is the only library in Itasca County that receives direct county funding, though "direct" is still a bit misleading. All of the county's library funds are paid to Arrowhead. But the entire library levy from the Grand Rapids Area Library's service area is sent to GRAL from ALS.

The other five Itasca County libraries — Bovey, Calumet, Coleraine, Keewatin and Marble — receive support services from Arrowhead but no "direct" county funding.

before assurance from the county.

"We would like Grand Rapids to have good, strong funding sources," she said. "But we don't want that at a cost to the support the county provides to the Arrowhead Library System because we really rely on that a lot."

Mostad-Jensen said there was a touch of the "what are we, chopped liver?" sentiment. But she still spoke in support of the Grand Rapids Area Library at the May County Board meeting.

Every library in the county is unique, and they all have a role to play, she said.

"Each library in our county offers something different and something that works better for someone or is their preference," Mostad-Jensen said. "And that's why we want them all to be as strong as they can be."

She agreed that Grand Rapids is the largest library in the county and should serve a broader community because of its size. But she gets patrons who visit the library in Coleraine because Grand Rapids isn't open most evenings.

"They really should be in a place where they could do that," Mostad-Jensen said. "And we want them to be there."



Art

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