

COLUMNISTS

Brown: High costs? Budget cuts? Even more reason to protect public libraries.

If they're allowed to fail, don't expect the private sector to step up.



By Aaron Brown

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Sun Ray Library in St. Paul. (Glen Stubbe/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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Libraries touched every stage of my life.

In first grade, I repeatedly checked out a Godzilla book from the Forbes Elementary library. Later, my mom took me to a paper airplane contest at one of my favorite places, the Hibbing Public Library. As a teenager, I drove my sister to dance class every Monday after school, spending the evening doing homework at the Virginia Public Library.

As a remote-working parent, I was bailed out many times by the Grand Rapids Area Public Library, which allowed me to work while our three little boys played and read books. In more recent years, several libraries supported my research as I wrote a Minnesota history book.

So for me and legions of library patrons from all walks of life, what's happening these days feels personal. Economic uncertainty and political neglect are quietly smothering public libraries across Minnesota.

"Communities are just having to face really tough decisions," said Sarah Hawkins, legislative director for the Minnesota Library Association and assistant director of the Anoka County Library. "When you're facing trickle-down budget cuts it's easier to cut the library because it [seems] a little bit more discretionary."

This is shortsighted. When we reduce library access, we aggravate our most pressing challenges: increased social isolation, inaccurate information, barriers to new technology and a higher cost of living. Libraries address all these problems efficiently, despite far too little political support.

In Minnesota, about 70% of public library funding comes from city and county governments, said Hawkins. The remaining 30% comes from state funding. Federal grant funding filters into both state and local sources. State funding has been stagnant and most federal grants have dried up under the current administration.

This pressures our cash-strapped local governments.

Like us, our cities and counties are paying more for everything these days. Local state aid is endangered, while state mandates are more numerous. Meantime, the population is aging while families become smaller, meaning fewer taxpayers split the expenses. Libraries aren't the biggest expense on a city ledger, but they jostle for increasingly limited funds.

The libraries from my life are now open far less often. In fact, Grand Rapids is open only three days a week. Virginia and Hibbing close much earlier than when I was a kid, which prevents a modern-day kid from using them the same way. But these towns are not alone.

Bemidji's library just took massive county budget cuts, and Duluth is considering leaving its valuable downtown library in favor of a shared facility with neighboring towns on the city's suburban edge. The problem is acute in rural Minnesota but also persists in metro library systems, where far more people are affected.

Modern libraries provide much more than books.

"We talk a lot about the library as a third place where you can come outside of your home or your work," said Hawkins. "You can gather or socialize and exchange ideas, and that really is just a key part in civic life and the well-being of our community."

In 2024, the New York Public Library system conducted a study of its patrons' experiences at the library. It established that a vast majority of people say the public library supported their physical and mental well-being, not just their reading lists.

You don't have to buy something to enjoy the library, nor do you need to join a new religion or swear allegiance to a political party. No need to feed quarters into a machine to sit down. At a library, you're free to be who you are and do what you want within the bounds of a few basic rules, most of which boil down to "love thy neighbor."

My local library is the only place I see kids from public schools, private schools and home-school families interacting with each other as part of a community. That's vitally important to our shared future.

There's nothing else like a public library, nor will the private sector ever provide such space and materials for everyone to use. Certainly not for free. And libraries continue to change with the times, offering e-books through easy-to-use apps and technology training for people of all ages.

Nevertheless, Minnesota libraries are seeking ways to survive funding shortfalls.

Starting Jan. 5, the Wyoming, Minn., Public Library in Chisago County begins a pilot project allowing some library patrons extended access to the library outside of normal hours.

From 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, people who agree to a set of rules and short training program may use their library cards to swipe into the facility. They can read or

work, use the internet, meet with people, or even check out books using an automated scanner.

“That allows us to more than double access to the community for the resource that they’re paying for,” said Carla Lydon, director of the East Central Regional Library system.

Staff remain available to help people and conduct programming during normal hours.

This kind of system has already been in use at libraries in Dakota and Scott counties for the past four years, said Lydon, to great success. If the first months go well at the Wyoming library, more patrons could sign up for the program around April.

There’s good reason for local leaders to make libraries more available to the public, but there’s a lot we can do even if they don’t.

“If you don’t have a library card, get one. If you have one, use it,” said Hawkins. “Think of one way to use your library in 2026. Don’t take them for granted.”

Minnesota must never give up on our public libraries. They are not a burden, but a cure for what ails our financially and emotionally stressed society.