

EQUITY IN LIBRARY FUNDING TASK FORCE

Providing all citizens with free and equitable public library service is a core Minnesota value. This value is reflected in numerous statutes, rules & regulations, and policies adopted by the State of Minnesota and all of its various units of local government.

“Public libraries are largely the responsibility of local governments.” This was a conclusion of the 2010 Office of the Legislative Auditor evaluation report on public libraries. This report went further, noting that “although the legislature has imposed funding requirements on Counties and those Cities that operate public libraries, there are few mandates regarding library operations.” It also states that there is little evidence that the public library system is broken.

On the surface these statements may appear correct. However, digging under the surface you find libraries from all corners of the State in the same situation we find ourselves. At least in Northeastern Minnesota, the financial hurdles are such that we would challenge the statement that the system is not broken. As noted below, there is a significant disparity in the sharing of costs associated with the current systems.

In Cloquet and Duluth, city taxpayers pay about \$40 per capita to support their public libraries. By statute, the Cloquet and Duluth public libraries must provide full service to all residents in the region free of charge, whether or not the residents live within the city limits. In contrast, taxpayers in Carlton and St. Louis counties pay \$8 to \$12 per capita for library services by supporting the Arrowhead Library System. In return, the Arrowhead Library System provides support to rural residents through mail-a-book, bookmobile, and support services to its member libraries. Ironically, rural residents, who pay less for library services, have access to the full range of Arrowhead System services and the services provided by public libraries in the region.

Over the years, local public officials have become concerned about the inequity in taxation for library services between rural residents and city residents. The OLA report clearly highlighted this inequity. A task force has been formed, consisting of library board members from Cloquet and Duluth, library staff, city management, Cloquet City Council member, Carlton County commissioner, Esko resident, and the Arrowhead Library System Director, to seek a solution for the disparity in library funding that exists in our region.

Cloquet and Duluth Public Libraries Statements of Concern:

- Cloquet and Duluth taxpayers bear the burden for providing library service to area residents.
- The Legislative Auditor found that cities that choose to operate libraries were required to pay more than twice as much per resident for library services than counties.

- Cloquet residents pay \$40.84 per resident for library services. Carlton County residents pay \$7.51 per resident for library services. Duluth taxpayers pay \$43.23 per capita for library services and St. Louis County taxpayers pay \$12.
- Cloquet and Duluth public libraries currently operate with funds from city budgets yet serve area residents who do not contribute to the operations of the libraries. 45% of the usage of the Cloquet Public Library comes from outside of Cloquet and 28% of the usage of the Duluth Public Library comes from outside of Duluth.
- As city budgets have been reduced by the loss of LGA, library budgets have also been reduced, resulting in fewer hours open to the public and fewer materials available for check out.
- AMC supports adequate funding for public libraries.
- LMC supports equity in availability of quality library services to city and township residents as long as there is equity in local property tax levies for libraries among participating jurisdictions.
- Equity in funding public libraries has been an issue since 1984 and discussed statewide several times since then.

We would challenge that it is not just the financial mandates that pose a problem (though they play a significant role). It is also the complex, multi-layered approach for delivering public library services. Through this approach the various Statutes, rules and regulations currently enacted by the State further limit the ability of local government to adapt and respond to our quickly changing economic and service demand climate.

Those rules do not encourage redesign, creativity and cooperation. Instead, they pit one unit of government against another for each tax dollar. Instead of investing in structural changes that lead to enhanced service provision, we are left with only the ability to look at cuts in service delivery. There is little opportunity to look long-term and plan for changing technologies and how that technology can be used to further service delivery. As a result, decisions are typically made in a reactionary manner and true innovation and change are stifled. This current system was put in place during a different era. Today the public's perception of public library services is different than it was just a few short years ago, and these constituents are demanding that change take place.

The library system in Minnesota is more than just city, county and regional library systems. Educational library systems that exist at our K-12 and higher education facilities are in reality part of the public system, though not by any formal definition. These systems, for children and young adults, were at one time critical to the learning process. K-12 provided youth with reading and education opportunities, and higher education provided research opportunities. As funding becomes more restrictive in these institutions a shift is taking place, resulting in greater expectation being placed upon public libraries to handle more and more of the services previously provided by these

agencies. The increased burden and demand shifts to our public libraries reached a level where the financial inequities cannot continue for much longer.

Over time, without a process that allows for financial equity, Minnesotans have nothing but a system that is in fact broken and left to fail. With these concerns and current funding constraints in mind, the task force would like to see future legislation drafted to address the inequity and allow for true change that would enhance library services to all Minnesota residents.