

Consolidated County Public Libraries:

Guidelines in Decision Making

Introduction

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's Division for Libraries and Technology has recently received a number of requests for information on the legality and desirability of combining public library services within a county, thereby creating a consolidated county public library. This document offers some guidelines for considering county consolidation.

Legal Basis

Chapter 43.57(1) of the Wisconsin statutes provides a legal mechanism for consolidated county libraries and county library services. According to the statutes, "a county board may establish and maintain a consolidated public library for the county, and may for such purpose adopt, take over and acquire any libraries already established, by consent of the authorities controlling those libraries." In this arrangement, a consolidated county public library is administered by a seven or nine member county library board appointed by the county board chairperson or county executive and functions as an agency of the county. The county library board must include at least one school district administrator (or the district administrator's representative) and one or two county board supervisors. The consolidated county library board has the same powers as a municipal library board. A uniform county library tax is applied on all of the taxable property of the county.

Items for Consideration

Before the decision to offer consolidated county public library service is made, the following should be considered:

All county residents would pay at the same rate for library services. Under the municipal public library model, property owners in municipalities with libraries pay a considerably higher tax rate for library services, while residents of municipalities without libraries pay lower tax rates. Under a consolidated county public library model, all county property owners would pay the same tax rate.

This means that the cost of library support would go up for properties located in municipalities that currently do not have a library, and for the county's rural residents. Tax rates for those properties located in municipalities that currently support libraries may go up or down, depending on their level of support.

Library service could be more consistent and equitable across the county, if planned as such. Under the municipal public library service model, great variance in library services may occur across the county. Non-library community members use municipal libraries, at a discounted rate, and each of these locally managed and funded municipal libraries offers the services that its municipality values and pays for. Under a consolidated county public

library model, the consolidated libraries would provide coordinated service for all county residents under one administration and one plan for library service, which would address ways to balance services throughout the county. Consideration should be given to the likely expectation that library services and access would be improved for residents whose tax rates increase due to consolidation.

Administrative costs may go down (or up), depending on several factors. Under a consolidated county library model, municipalities with libraries could elect to be part of the county consolidation, and would thereafter be administered as a single agency. This would require only one certified public library director, likely with a Grade 1 certification, which requires a library Master's degree. All public library staff would become county employees, which may or may not reduce costs. Administrative tasks currently performed at each library would be performed centrally, and costs attendant to holding library board meetings could be reduced, as there would be only one library board in the county. It is important to conduct a detailed cost/benefit analysis to determine whether consolidation of county library services will meet the financial and service goals identified in the plan.

Municipalities with libraries are not obligated to join the consolidated county public library. If the county decides to pursue offering consolidated public library service to its residents, municipalities with local public libraries are under no obligation to join. That municipality would continue to govern its own local library and would be completely independent from the consolidated county library. Special consideration should be given to this concept; municipalities with libraries may fear the perceived loss of local control inherent in the consolidated county public library model, as the county would assume control of all assets owned by the local libraries who participate in the consolidated service model.

Planning

Before a consolidated county library is established, the county's plan for library service must be revised via a county board appointed planning committee per s. 43.11. The revised plan should address:

- *Number of library outlets (branch libraries and/or bookmobiles) and types of services offered at outlets.* The consolidated county library service plan should indicate how current, participating libraries will operate, whether new sites would be opened or current sites would be closed. Location of outlets can help to encourage use within the county and minimize use of libraries in adjacent counties. Levels of service for each branch should also be identified.
- *Minimum number of municipalities.* If desired, the plan could specify the minimum number of municipalities with libraries required to join the consolidation agreement before it can be established. Of the eight counties currently operating consolidated county public libraries in Wisconsin, five of them have an independent library that elected not to enter into the consolidation agreement.
- *County assumption of assets owned by local libraries.* Municipalities with libraries have invested substantially in their facilities, collections, furnishings, equipment, and other resources, yet

assets may be turned over to the county library board. The county should negotiate the conditions under which local library assets would be turned over to the county, including gifts, bequests, and endowments to specific libraries. Special consideration should be given to libraries located within multi-use municipal buildings, which share the use of certain spaces. Vendor contracts with individual libraries should be renegotiated.

- *Possible municipal sharing of library support.* In some Wisconsin consolidated county public libraries, funding comes solely from the county. In others, the municipalities where branches are located provide additional support, such as sharing or assuming the costs of building maintenance or utilities. The terms of such support should be negotiated and addressed in the plan.
- *Personnel.* The plan should address the retention or reorganization of staff and the conversion of staff to the county payroll, which may have an impact on pay scales and benefits of library employees. This may include the library director, who may be required to hold a higher level of certification by the DPI Division for Libraries and Technology. Individual staff members' participation in the Wisconsin Retirement System may need to be maintained. Others who currently may not have benefits may be eligible under the aegis of the county.

For more information, contact:

Shannon M. Schultz, Public Library Administration Consultant
Division for Libraries & Technology
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
P: 608-266-7270 shannon.schultz@dpi.wi.gov