

September 2, 2020

Dear Marathon County Board Members,

I'm writing to you with a major concern regarding the future of the Marathon County Public Library (MCPL). I am a long-time Marathon County resident, as well as 20-plus year member and treasurer of the Wisconsin Valley Library Service (WVLS) Board of Trustees. WVLS is one of Wisconsin's 16 regional public library systems, serving 25 libraries in the seven north central Wisconsin counties of Clark, Forest, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Oneida and Taylor. A library system map is found at <https://dpi.wi.gov/pld/directories/systems>

The Marathon County Library Director has asked his Board of Trustees to consider moving Marathon County from WVLS, presently headquartered in Wausau, to the South Central Library System (SCLS) headquartered in Madison. This is troubling to me for several reasons.

The nine Marathon County community libraries now administered as a consolidated county wide operation have a collective 58-year history of leadership in our region. Wausau's library was the anchor for the Wisconsin Valley Library Regional Reference Service organized in 1961. When legislation was passed in 1972 to organize public library systems, what is now MCPL became the resource library for WVLS under WI Statute 43.16 and the WVLS began renting office space in MCPL's Wausau branch. Marathon County representatives currently fill 7 chairs on the 15-member WVLS board. MCPL staff members are well respected by their peers in our region and hold key leadership positions on intra-system WVLS committees and boards.

Before Wausau Mayor (and former WVLS trustee) Katie Rosenberg left the MCPL Board at the end of 2019, the other trustees accepted her suggestion that a Task Force be formed to look into the move. Its first meeting was in January 2020. After only six hours of meeting and discussion time, the Task Force gave public notice for its seventh meeting on August 17 that a "possible recommendation" might be made.

This resulted in an outpouring of letters from library stakeholders, many of which suggested deliberations were incomplete and questioned how the move could be justified without exploring the full range of potential change consequences upon the Marathon County economy, cost to taxpayers and service to library patrons. The stakeholder letters are posted at <https://wvls.org/mcpl-system-exploration/>. Many of them ask "Why this? Why now? Why transfer \$400,000 in state library aid currently spent in the Wausau area to Dane County?"

During all the years I've been a WVLS Trustee, I do not recall any MCPL declaration of insufficient system support on their annual reports to the Department of Public Instruction. No complaints have come to my attention as a Marathon County representative. There has been no reach out to Marathon County representatives like me on the WVLS Board by the MCPL Board or Task Force during this process. No one from MCPL has accepted WVLS invitations to meet with WVLS Board. On November 8, 2019 the MCPL Director's answer to an inquiry from the WVLS Trustee Board president was, "we are not aware of any service issues that we seek to resolve at the present time." That exchange of letters is also posted at the link above.

To the best of my knowledge, no MCPL strategic plan has been presented to the Task Force by MCPL administration. There is nothing equivalent to a detailed comparison that WVLS or SCLS could address.

On August 17, Task Force members agreed there was unfinished business and deferred a recommendation “to the end of the year.” This was confirmed by the MCPL Board an hour later. I was surprised to note in the MCPL System Membership Review Task Force Summary submitted to the Marathon Co. MCEEED Committee by the MCPL Director on August 28, “Final analysis and vote for the Task Force recommendation to the MCPL Board will take place at the November 16, 2020 meeting” at which Corporation Counsel Corbett will be available. Discussion at the August 17 MCPL meetings mentioned four remaining meetings and neither specified a November recommendation nor Corbett’s presence.

A thorough Task Force exploration of the “why” and “how much” questions during the next four months is essential to justifying Marathon County’s departure from WVLS. It is my hope that the Marathon County Library Board will decide to make an honest effort to work with WVLS to iron out any substantive complaints that have yet to surface. Please be aware that should the MCPL Board decide a move is warranted, WI Statute 43.18 details the responsibility of the Marathon County Board of Supervisors to next make their own fair and impartial assessment of potential consequences.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have concerning this issue.

Sincerely yours,

Mike Otten



Marathon County Benefits

- 7 of 15 appointments on WVLS Board of Trustees
- \$400,000 Annual State Aid flows into Marathon County
- \$400,000 Annual revenue from member counties/municipalities flows into Marathon County
- WVLS headquarters onsite, \$42,000 rent
- \$20,000 WVLS Innovation & Collaboration Grant
- \$10,000 Annual Resource Library Collection Development Grant
- \$44,000 WVLS OverDrive Digital Library Collection at no cost
- Direct access to WVLS Consultants and Technology Support, no hidden costs
- MCPL leadership on most WVLS committees and projects
- Onsite WVLS committee meetings and continuing education events
- \$46,000 Annual Gale Courses and database contracts at no cost
- Annual scholarships to attend national and statewide conferences
- Annual Summer Library Performer Grant
- Access to premier collection of makerspace, literacy, and memory kits

“ I found the [Gale] course very helpful, in fact I recommended it to a coworker after I completed it. I plan to utilize some of the conflict resolution and objective techniques. Thanks for a great course!

-MCPL Staff Lead

Thank you for the opportunity to attend this wonderful, engaging, and educational conference... I hope to be able to attend future library conferences to continue learning and growing as a librarian and branch manager.

-MCPL Branch Coordinator 



Director Marla Sepnafski,
2019 WI Librarian of the Year,
2019 Legislative Citation



Consultant Kris Adams Wendt,
1993 WI Librarian of the Year as
Rhinelander District Library Director

WVLS As Statewide Leaders

- Gubernatorial Appointment to Council For Libraries and Network Development (COLAND)
- Gubernatorial appointment to Wisconsin Humanities Council
- Renowned legislative advocacy expertise
- Awarded \$327,000 statewide contract for Beanstack website-smart device library program product
- Negotiating discounted Gale Courses contract and sharing statewide marketing materials
- Launched statewide bulk computer procurement and data storage project
- Workforce Development and Public Library Partnerships
- WVLS Trustee Leadership recognition: 6 WI Trustee of the Year Awards, 1 WI Librarian of the Year Award, 1 WI Special Services Award

WVLS Fosters Civic Engagement and Proactive Legislative Relationships

- 2014 Act 157, WVLS Consultant assisted in the compromise regarding cross-county payment rules, prevented a potential revenue loss to MCPL at a minimum of \$87,135
- 2015 Act 169 enabled public libraries to legally share limited information of delinquent accounts with law enforcement/collection agencies to recover tax payer dollars