

Sharon Hunter, President
Marathon County Public Library Board of Trustees
300 North First Street
Wausau
WI 54403

January 24, 2021

Dear Board of Trustees President Hunter (Sharon),

I am writing in regard to the proposal to remove Marathon County Public Library (MCPL) from the Wisconsin Valley Library Service (WVLS) and relocate MCPL to the South Central Library Service (SCLS).

Having reviewed the materials available for review (on your website), I ask that this proposal be rejected by the Board of Trustees or, at the very most, be tabled pending further study.

The letter from the DPI contains a clear statement that this proposed action contradicts state-wide planning for regional equity. The DPI letter also offers “some clarifications and recommends that the MCPL board consider them when making its decision,” including: Reorganization of state-wide material distribution is a work in progress and none can claim to know where the distribution center will be located; and, patron services in MCPL will be adversely affected by the relatively lower availability of materials in SCLS (lower per capita resources) that results in delays in delivering materials within SCLS. On the latter point, the DPI letter notes that MCPL receives more material, and by implication more efficiently, from WVLS members than it receives, helping to meet demand in Marathon County.

Finally, DPI stresses: “If the board is undecided about system affiliation at this time, then it may wish to explore these issues further. If, however, the board is certain that MCPL will change systems, it may wish to further consider whether now is the right time to do so. The Wisconsin Library Association’s Library Development and Legislation Committee is aware of legislative concern over funding of public libraries in response to the negative public perception of library closures during the pandemic. The MCPL board should carefully consider the stability of its support from the county at this time, so that it can make a sustainable decision that is in the best interest of the residents of Marathon County.”

In my view, this sets a very high standard for materials, analysis, review, and planning. I do not see this in the mass of unfocused materials the administration has placed before the board.

For example, please allow me to review the “Advantages of moving to SCLS.”

- “Larger collection of materials for patrons to access”
 - Clearly contradicted by the DPI opinion on availability of materials
- “ILS System that is more conducive to the needs of MCPL”
 - Clearly contradicted by the DPI opinion on availability of materials
- “MCPL would be a member/peer of similar sized libraries leading to improved collaboration, opportunities, and services offered which would transcend [sic] MCPL to the next level and beyond.”
 - Like other statements, this is aspirational and has no specifics attached in any documents.
- “Specialized staff to assist MCPL to achieve its goal of becoming a premier library”
 - Lack of understanding of the impact of being part of a bigger system with distributed technical and other assistance, something I experienced in the UW Colleges as they tried to save to budget. Relying on centralized service 150 miles away is extremely challenging and costly given the technological resources that have to be established.
- “MCPL would have the opportunity to restructure staff responsibilities/positions to take advantage of SCLS services offered and to shift funding to offset the increased membership cost of the new system.”
 - Vague and not reflected in any financial document with any degree of specificity – aspirational. I would think that a plan of this import would have a clear financial pro forma attached.
- “MCPL customers would be better served by increased access to materials, programs, and services. Larger inventory of available materials. More services available and support staff.”
 - Vague, aspirational, repetitive of points above.
- More continuing education and professional development opportunities that pertain to the size of MCPL
 - The precise and eloquent statement from your own director of continuing education, Jamie Matczak, belies this statement.

Frankly, if I was a board member, I would have concerns about an administration that puts this quality of work before me as I consider such momentous decision.

The disadvantages listed in that same document are much more specific than the advantages.

As referenced above, there is a lack of a clear financial plan on making up the deficit this will create the budget. I’d calling it “hitting and hoping.” Yes, maybe the Foundation will pay the membership costs – which I would consider a totally inappropriate investment from the Foundation -- or maybe we will become the statewide distribution center, but that’s up in the air. And exactly how many staff need to be laid off and how, exactly, their roles will be filled is not laid out anywhere – but somehow this will lead to better patron services.

Size is always relative. MCPL can be a leader in the WVLS, but only a follower in SCLS. We have a bigger voice in the north and that’s worth some investment by us. We are entirely detached

from the SCLS, the core of which is around Madison and which stretches down to the Illinois border. This is not a “good deal” for MCPL, its patrons, or county taxpayers.

I am firm believers in helping build and strengthen our region, even if there are some data in favor of leaving our region and leaving smaller libraries in our region to fend for themselves. We know budgets are tight, but, frankly, I’d be willing to put up with some disbenefit to maintain our region’s strength and the health of smaller systems in north and northcentral Wisconsin.

Lastly, I’d rather see the board get the administrations of WVLS and MCPL in the same room with a counsellor-consultant and work towards a better functioning relationship, one that rises above personalities and gets the work of the library and region done. That would be a better investment with a clear goal in mind.

Given the deficiencies in planning, I ask that the Board of Trustees please vote against the proposal to relocate the MCPL to SCLS.

I wish this letter to be placed in the public record.

Sincerely,



Keith Montgomery

Copies: Members, Board of Trustees