

January 25, 2021

Dear Marathon County Public Library Board Members,

Thank you for your service to the citizens of Marathon County. As a member of the Wausau School District Board of Education, I well appreciate the hours that you spend reading information, talking with constituents, and fielding phone calls on various issues. Your hard work and dedication are appreciated.

I previously wrote to you on August 16, 2020 to share my concerns about the MCPL administration's desire to leave the Wisconsin Valley Library Service (WVLS) and join the South Central Library System (SCLS). I never received a response. As a former school librarian, former member of the WVLS Board of Trustees, and former member of the WVLS Library Advisory Committee, I have working knowledge of the services WVLS provides to its member libraries, as well as the services MCPL and school libraries provide to communities across Marathon County.

With this background experience and knowledge, I write to you again to share my concerns about MCPL administration's persistent effort to leave the WVLS and questions regarding underlying motivations behind it. It is my hope that they will be addressed during the 30 minutes dedicated for discussion and possible recommendation on Monday's MCPL Board meeting agenda to provide board members who were not at the Task Force table with greater understanding.

As I am sure you have discovered, this issue is complicated. The fact that no two regional library systems are alike in addressing regional need makes head-to-head comparison difficult and the future challenging to predict. To provide just one example directly impacting my career as a professional librarian in Marathon County, WVLS was the first, and *still is the only* library system in the state to build collaboration among public, school, academic and specialty libraries into its governance and service model structure without waiting for state financial incentive by actively encouraging multi-type collaboration at the local level throughout its member communities for the past 50 years.

The statutory blueprint for Wisconsin public library system infrastructure was deliberately created to both provide each regional library consortium with a large resource library as its nucleus and to allow library system services to evolve organically in response to consortium community needs. Each resource library became a leader and bonding agent among the other libraries. Public library system legislation was also deliberately crafted using the co-op or consortium model so that no single library – including the largest designated resource library – is unilaterally subsidizing all the other member libraries. The entire cooperative subsidizes and benefits all members, including through economies of scale for group purchases of ILS software and support, supplies and equipment. Everyone wins.

The Marathon County Vision Statement asserts that “[Marathon County government] is proactive in enhancing health and safety, protecting the environment, and providing cultural, recreational, and economic opportunities which make Marathon County **and the surrounding area a preferred place to live**, work, visit and do business.” Should Marathon County decide to leave WVLS, communities near and far will be impacted. How does leaving WVLS make Marathon County and the surrounding area a preferred place to live, work, visit and do business?

No other resource library has ever left a library system because it no longer wanted to provide regional leadership. This library's blatant disregard for the welfare of the region and the smaller libraries in neighboring counties (which are very much like its own branches), as well as little regard for the partnerships its library system has forged with other systems, is a reckless abstention of leadership.

It has been astonishing to read the argument that we must do only what is best for Marathon County and can ignore the smaller libraries – many of which also serve Marathon County residents across county and municipal lines – that will struggle because of this decision. Our County Supervisors are being told that MCPL should not be picking up the tab for libraries that are not pulling their weight in the consortium. Really? *Public libraries are a service, provided to all, and paid for with our tax dollars. They are not a business that operates only in its own best interest.* Please clarify what the rhetoric about MCPL taking care of its poor neighbors means after considering the following:

- MCPL is a net borrower of materials from other WVLS libraries – it borrows more materials for those who use its 9 locations than it shares with the other 24 libraries for use by their communities.
- The cost to MCPL for the ILS (V-Cat) is based on usage (circulation and number of materials in their collection).
- Per \$1,000 in expenditures, MCPL is not ranked highest in the WVLS consortium for library visits, program attendance, registered borrowers, circulation, or full-time employees.
- Per service population, MCPL is not ranked highest in the WVLS consortium for library visits, program attendance, registered borrowers, circulation, or full-time employees.
- Per \$1,000 in expenditures for FTEs, no library ranks lower than MCPL, but 12 libraries invest more for personnel.
- Only two libraries rank lower than MCPL when using service population for FTE comparisons.
- Many WVLS libraries have contributed significant financial support to the WVLS OverDrive Advantage fund to reduce the wait time for OverDrive digital content. While Marathon County residents are the largest users of the collection, MCPL has yet to support the collection.

It is also necessary to take issue with and address MCPL Director Illick's comments in the January 14, 2021 *City Pages* article "Task Force recommending library move to larger system" for misinformation and lack of full disclosure of all relevant facts. Four examples of misinformation are very troubling.

- Illick states that *"MCPL pays 40% of shared costs."* MCPL also receives the largest benefit. See bullet points above.
- Illick states that *"Switching to the South Central Consortium would cost \$100,000 more than the county is paying to be in the WVLS Group."* What is the percentage of shared costs MCPL would pay to SCLS? If lower than WVLS, this means that they may desire to pay at a lower percentage but are willing to pay at a higher cost.
- Illick states that: *"the savings through eliminating reductions in staffing through attrition and services that would be duplicated under the new consortium would save about \$200,000."* Why was the loss in revenue received from MCPL through rent, collection development grants and continuing education scholarships not mentioned? Why was the loss of all WVLS databases offered freely to Marathon County residents not mentioned? Why was the comparable cost WVLS would charge for "services that would be duplicated under the new consortium" not revealed?
- The article states, *"the county's Economic Development, Education and Extension committee will ultimately make a recommendation on the potential move to the full county board."* As the MCPL Board had not yet voted on the matter, this statement is presumptive and reckless.

The January 25 MCPL Board agenda allows 15 minutes for a review of "County Strategic Plan alignments with System Membership Review." The [2020 Marathon County Strategic Plan Update](#) shares efforts and successes of all Marathon County departments since the implementation of the [2018-2022 Marathon County Strategic Plan](#). MCPL reported on the LENA Start project under Objective 3.3 "Ensure that every child makes it to adulthood with health, stability, and growth opportunities," and that 24-hour Wi-Fi access at all MCPL locations was implemented in response to Object 8.7 "Strive to provide affordable, reliable, high-speed internet access throughout the county." The library is also mentioned as a contributor to Objective 10.6 "Ensure the future availability of a skilled and flexible workforce prepared to meet the needs of both existing and emerging industries and technologies"; Objective 10.20 "Create an innovative atmosphere to foster an entrepreneurial supportive environment"; and Objective 12.3 "Promote cost effective public services." **I do not see that MCPL provided updates to the 2020 Marathon County Strategic Plan Update and am wondering what the library has done in those areas since 2018.**

While MCPL as a county department should be included in the county's strategic planning process, the Marathon County Public Library as an autonomous department under a statutorily mandated board of trustees should have its own comprehensive strategic plan setting service priorities and established methods for achieving them. The [MCPL Attributes and Outcomes](#) documents does not codify specific goals and activities and service metrics within each attribute or document how a comprehensive annual review will be shared with the public. It does not indicate a process or method of reporting how it compares to other libraries in the state using tools and metrics as the [Wisconsin Public Library Standards](#) developed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and [Wisconsin Public Library Service Data](#). It is

irresponsible for the MCPL Board and administration to make a decision regarding library system membership without a clear vision for the future and without clearly articulated unmet service needs and future service goals.

You will find attached a separate analysis of the MCPL Task Force process which I find to be seriously flawed. The process did not consistently show its work in the open and is therefore difficult to trust. The process ignored significant data and facts. It failed to respond to concerns on the process or question the MCPL Administration and Task Force members' points of view. Evidence that the Task Force was not undergoing a rigorous, unbiased investigation was signaled when the Task Force attempted to abruptly end the investigation in August. Word was spread throughout the Wisconsin library community that SCLS personnel appeared confident of a favorable outcome well before the Task Force completed and voted on its final report or the MCPL Board had its opportunity to weigh in. See the November 2020 WVLS Director's Update [here](#).

One of the unaddressed mysteries is why MCPL focused exclusively on SCLS rather than considering all options. Under state law, a county may decide to migrate to any other public library system with member counties adjacent to its own borders. Two other library systems border Marathon County. Why was the Nicolet Federated Library System (NFLS), where 5 of its 8 member counties are consolidated like MCPL and its resource library in Brown County is larger than MCPL, not invited to present its case during the MCPL Board's system investigation? Why is the MCPL Board permitted to decide on what system the county *can* join, but not permitted to decide on what system the county *cannot* join?

In January 2019, the original reasons given to WVLS for "*looking at*" a different system in the first place were about motivating the MCPL staff to do better work and to network with colleagues in larger libraries. As the year progressed, attempts by WVLS staff and its board to discuss differences or unmet needs were rebuffed with the assurance in October that the MCPL Director and Board President Hunter were "not aware of any service issues that we seek to resolve at the present time" and they were "determined to make this a thoughtful and deliberate process." The MCPL Task Force was promoted by former MCPL trustee Katie Rosenberg prior to assuming duties as Mayor of Wausau in September and again in December 2019 as necessary in-depth study before preemptively leaving WVLS.

In the early months of 2020, it was evident that the motivation was less about those matters than it was about joining SCLS. However, the "investigation" that ensued lacked serious analysis of different systems based more on self-promotional materials than on how they could address any of MCPL's articulated service needs. More rhetorical and speculative, the process attempted to prove WVLS to be the poorer choice. Information shared by WVLS as counterpoint to the SWOT analysis, cursory MCPL comparative financial report and the final Task Force report were ignored. Substantial evidence suggests that MCPL needs to leave WVLS, needs to win at all costs, to fulfill the MCPL Director's guarantee to SCLS that steps were being taken to get this done and that he had the votes to make it happen. The place we find ourselves now is unrecognizable from where we started. As a taxpayer, library user, and community leader I continue to ask why.

Like Mayor Rosenberg – herself a former member of the WVLS Board like me – I have profound difficulty understanding the nature of and reasons for the MCPL Director's strong desire to leave WVLS. Marathon County Corporation Counsel Scott Corbett stated repeatedly during a recent meeting of the Marathon County Executive Committee that strict statutory process guidelines are in place because of the significant ramifications that can occur from a county leaving a system. As library leaders, I would expect that you would much rather work to ensure that all aspects of a service migration are addressed and that no unanswered questions remain before deciding a matter of this magnitude and turning it over to the County.

Sincerely,
Beth Martin
Wausau School Board Member
Marathon County Taxpayer

Concerns Arising from the Marathon County Public Library Task Force Library System Inquiry Process

(It appears that all the Task Force minutes quoted below were compiled by member Rebecca Frisch from her notes.)

January 2020 Task Force minutes:

“In January we had hoped to talk about Attracting and Retaining Employees. When looking at library systems, does system membership impact MCPL’s ability to attract and retain exceptional employees?”

Comment: Public library systems work behind the scenes to support the goals and service plans of local libraries and do not present a barrier to a library’s ability to maintain qualified and adequate staffing. The ability to attract and retain exceptional employees is determined by organizational culture administered by local library leadership backed by municipal funding and community culture. Would like to see evidence of how WVLS has directly impacted staffing for MCPL and Marathon Co. thus far. What is the rate of attrition in MCPL staff due to termination, resignation, and retirement during the last decade under the current director?

“Arend: does the library have a strategic plan or a plan where you want services to be in five to ten years? Director Illick: we have operated off of our Attributes and outcomes. These were developed to take the place of a strategic plan. Arend: could the committee have something in writing on where you would want to go. The most important issues will be what you will need from the library system for support to get to where you want to be.”

Comment: When looking at the [MCPL Attributes and Outcomes](#) it is difficult to identify annual performance and service goals, as well as tools used to identify outcomes. How these attributes align with statutory system services is unclear. Mr. Arend is correct in asking whether the library has “something in writing on where you would want to go...what you will need from the library system support to get to where you want to be.” Those basic long range planning questions were neither provided by MCPL administration nor answered by the Task Force process.

March 2020 Task Force minutes:

“Library Director was asked to have library staff determine our vision and how the answers from the library systems fit into the vision for MCPL.”

Comment: What does this even mean? Did the staff share information answering this request with the Task Force?

May 2020 Task Force minutes:

“Discussion of June Topic: Innovation, Organization Excellence Director Illick explained layers of innovation that will impact the library over the coming years, and we would hope we could get support with those. The items listed are aged equipment for processing our RFID’s, from our ILS we have a need to get into the reporting features that are not accessible at the moment, we would like to know if Koha has the capability to access the information that is needed for old debt. The old debt is no longer collectable, but we have to figure out to identify it first and then retire that old debt.”

Comment: The WVLS and SCLS responses to the Innovation questions were not covered in the June meeting as anticipated. Why did this happen and who made that decision? See [Innovation Questions from MCPL Task Force](#) and [WVLS Response to Innovation Questions Packet June 2020](#) Questions asked by WVLS in its response were never answered.

June 2020 Task Force minutes:

“Review of WVLS & SCLS Mission, Values, and Goals documents Becky Frisch asked for more information regarding Lean Wisconsin. Marla Sepnafski stated it is a collaboration between three library systems in the area of technology. There was then a discussion concerning the development of a ranking methodology and system to aid in the decision process. Becky Frisch reviewed the core values as related to SCLS staff values and quality standards and was looking for comparable information in the WVLS packet. Marla Sepnafski reported that WVLS does not have a collection of core values stated in the same way. Shannon Schulz pointed out that each system

has their values recorded in different ways. Mark Arend said that it is not the words on the page but in how those words that are put into action that should be considered. He further stated that he believed no topic should be considered ready to close with conclusions at this time and that ranking should be undertaken at the end of the process. Gary Beastron asked that a comparison of comparable information be created to ease the process in that not having comparable information side by side makes evaluation difficult. Shannon Schultz noted that comparisons of systems should be taken in light of alignment with the needs of Marathon County."

Comment: It is curious that the Task Force did not yet know in June how it was going to do comparisons and rankings of the two systems. Also interesting when reviewing the governance documents, is that Mr. Arend said, "It is not the words on the page but in how those words that are put into action that should be considered." The Task Force Report indicated that a reason for moving to SCLS was that its organizational culture "aligns more closely with that of MCPL and Marathon County." Yet there is no ready evidence of how or why this statement is true in available documents. Unsupported words are not facts.

July 2020 Task Force minutes:

"Discussion of August Topic: Service to Customers Internal and SWOT Analysis and Summary. This SWOT Analysis is different, the committee is looking at the organizations. Research was done and different types of analysis were found. Questions were developed to guide the committee in doing the SWOT analysis. Complete the SWOT analysis chart in the next two (2) to three (3) weeks and turn back into Mark Arend. The information will be compiled, and results will be shared at the August meeting."

Comment: Who was involved in developing the SWOT questions, and who decided the language and questions to include? Why was the completion of the SWOT done by email and not at an open meeting of the Task Force? The July minutes also stated under Future Meeting Dates and Topics: "August 17: Service to Customers Internal and SWOT Analysis and Summary."

Then an unexpected **August 7, 2020 email** from Mark Arend to WVLS and SCLS stated:

"We will have what may be our final meeting on the 17th. We've got one last question for you: MCPL and Marathon County have invested nearly a decade in improving their organizational culture. For example, all county employees who serve in leadership roles have been through leadership training provided by consulting firms like Lighthouse Consulting and Lumin Advantage Consulting. Among the most productive tools gained by that organization-wide consulting was the practice of "Rounding." The library was among the five original county teams to use the rounding method, and they have statistical evidence to verify an almost unprecedented cultural turnaround over the past 10 years. How does your system address their leadership role in working with their member libraries, and how do you build strong relationships with those member libraries? We'd like each of you to briefly speak to this at the meeting and then answer questions from the committee. We will then discuss and possibly make a recommendation to the MCPL Board." [emphasis added]

The **agenda for the August 2020 Task Force meeting** also shared: "discussion and comparison of the two systems."

August 2020 Task Force minutes:

"Possible recommendation to the Marathon County Public Library Board of Trustees. No recommendation at this time. This agenda item will be discussed in November or December."

Comment: Who decided the SWOT analysis and summary was not going to be done and why? As this deviated from the required topics approved by the MCPL Task Force in February, how was this decision made outside of the Task Force open meeting process? Who decided the "final question" and why was the possibility of making a recommendation suddenly suggested for the August meeting? A recommendation was not made. Who decided to abruptly bring the process to an end and then reversed course, and why? A "charter" is first mentioned in the August 2020 MCPL Task Force meeting minutes. When was the MCPL Task Force charter developed and by whom? When was it placed on the MCPL website?

September 2020 Task Force Minutes:

“Gary Beastrost stated: One question I would have, we are looking at an extra \$100,000 to join South Central versus WVLS. Is that in the budget? Does that need to be budgeted countywide? We are expecting a \$5,000,000 shortfall, are we being good stewards of our money with the switch. ... Director Illick spoke of the costs. It is accurate that the costs would be greater in SCLS, it is also true that we would need fewer staff. We would make up the difference in the costs through attrition and reorganizing. We could be spending less by going to SCLS because we wouldn't need the same staff. SCLS would be doing our cataloging and with the technical assistance they would give us. We would be saving an estimated amount of \$200,000 a year with salary and benefits....”

“The Task Force has received some examples or possible questions to consider to do the SWOT Analysis template. Please complete the analysis over the next couple of weeks and send it back to Mark Arend. The information will be compiled into one document with hopes to be sent out before the October meeting.”

Comment: What is the cost for WVLS to do the cataloging for MCPL? Would it be lower than what SCLS would be charging? It is very unfortunate that the concerns raised in the MCPL administrative team letters included in the [September Task Force packet](#) did not get the follow up deserved from MCPL leadership. If matters were so unpleasant that MCPL administration felt a need to present them in letters to the Task Force, why weren't those same concerns shared with the WVLS Board? Alleging unresolved issues without any prior awareness by the MCPL or WVLS Boards or opportunity for WVLS to discuss and respond before using them as ammunition in the Task Force process is both unhelpful and unprofessional. The SWOT analysis was back on for October, still with no clear public understanding of where the sample questions came from or how they were vetted because this didn't happen in an open meeting.

October 2020 Task Force Minutes:

“Public Comments – Task Force Member Frisch wanted to mention that she and several members of the task force have received several letters over the summer and recently. Task Force Member Frisch is a little confused regarding the role of other members of WVLS and the work the Task Force is supposed to do according to the charter. I would like to have a specific agenda item in November as I have some specific questions I would like directed to the Library Board of Trustees. I would like to talk about the relevance about the letters and the work we are to be doing. Mark Arend would like the agenda item emailed to him.”

Comment: Why was the charter brought up at this time when letters were provided to the MCPL Task Force several months earlier? Task Force member Frisch had specific questions to direct to the MCPL Board. What were they?

November 2020 Task Force Minutes:

“Task Force member Frisch asked to have this as an agenda item. After receiving a number of letters throughout the year, it reminded me to go back through the Task Force Charter. Because we received so many letters, I thought we should have a discussion about them at a meeting. There is no mention in the charter about us engaging in public comments, public hearings, public input, or surveys of other counties. I'm going to have the conclusion that although the letters provided us with some background information that we need not consider them because it is not included within our charter or our direction. These are now available in our records and available to the Library Board of Trustees and County Board.”

Comment: The charter did not specifically state they could not address the letters. Why did the Task Force choose not to address the letters during the investigation? Can we anticipate the MCPL Board will discuss the letters sent to it prior to any vote on system membership?

December 2020 Task Force Minutes:

“Task Force member Hunter provided a list of fifteen (15) reasons to move. Task Force member Frisch believes that the Library Board and the library staff have been following the County's comprehensive and strategic plans. Task Force member Winch agrees with the comments and wants what is best for MCPL. He does understand it will have an impact on other libraries. Task Force member Beastrost expressed reservations regarding the loss of a resource library for the

outlying communities. I have to disagree on the statements made that this discussion doesn't only involve Marathon County, but it involves the northeast corner of the state. "

Comments: Why didn't the final report include all 15 items? How were the reasons vetted? The final report appeared in final form for the January 11, 2021 meeting and appears to have been written outside of an open meeting. Although the Task Force votes (Hunter, Winch and Frisch yes, Beastrom no, Arend and Schultz abstentions) on the question of affirming a move to SCLS were recorded in the December Task Force minutes, the 50% of Task Force votes abstained from voting or voted to not join SCLS was not mentioned in the final report. If Mr. Beastrom consulted on contributing his point of view to the report, it was not included. It was very interesting that this was the first time in 11 months that there was mention of the County's comprehensive plan and strategic plan.

The blatant lack of clarity in the MCPL task Force process is also evident in the MCPL Task Force Report. The eight reasons for moving to SCLS are rhetorical and not grounded in facts, data, or a rigorous community-driven, evidence-based analysis. A willful disregard of facts and data is troubling. The process and final report paint a picture of motivations more personal than service-based; more reactive and less proactive. Throughout the investigation the focus has been on outward appearances – MCPL can be more like Madison Public Library – rather than on what it wanted to achieve for Marathon County constituents, whether they live in the City of Wausau or one of the rural branch communities.

Following the breadcrumbs, this process looks like it has been a solution in search of a problem from day one. It fails to explain to the taxpayers of Marathon County, and library leaders across the state why leaving WVLS is the only option for achieving improved library services.