

February 26, 2021

Dear MCPL Board of Trustees,

During discussion of the proposed Marathon County move to SCLS at your February 15 meeting, I heard the library board president say, “this is about our library, not about the small libraries.” She referred to Wisconsin Valley Library Service as a “vendor,” stating that if board members were unhappy with a vendor’s services, they could change vendors.

As the director of the Owen Public Library – one of those “small libraries” – I beg to differ. A *vendor* is a person or business making or purchasing products to sell to other people or businesses with a goal of making a profit. A regional public library system like WVLS is a *community*, like the community of Marathon County departments. Similar to a game of Jenga, you cannot remove a piece without risk of destabilizing the whole structure. While you must, of course, make the best possible decision for your library, it is unwise to do so without considering its effect on the other members of the community it’s a part of because those effects may circle back to harm your institution down the road.

As librarians, we collect materials and offer services, but it is not the number of materials, the size of the buildings they are housed in, or the services themselves that are of utmost importance. It is the people we serve. How much time did the task force spend on discerning the needs of MCPL library patrons?

I invite you to consider whether your patrons might be better served by another path. Rather than being a mere buyer of library services, please come back to being a leader in WVLS. I have been a library director in this system long enough to remember when MCPL was a true leader and collaborator. The whole system was better off for it. I agree with what Wausau School Board member Beth Martin wrote, “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.”

You have a great staff that is more than capable of leadership. I have interacted with MCPL staff as a visitor in your libraries, as a colleague at conferences and other events and as a fellow committee member on WVLS projects. Would not more be gained by investing in your own professional, knowledgeable, and helpful staff than in contracting with professionals far away in Madison? Your staff, who interact with the members of the community every day, as well as the WVLS staff located just down the hall in your own main branch, are much more attuned to the needs of your patrons than someone in a city two hours away could ever be.

Director of the University of South Carolina’s School of Information Science, R. David Lankes said “Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities.” Please reconsider your future vision for Marathon County Public Library.

Loralee Petersen, Director
Owen Public Library