



South Central Library System

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Testimony on Behalf of the South Central Library System Presented to the Senate Education Committee March 28, 2001

My name is Peter Hamon. I am the Director of the South Central Library System, which serves the 50 public libraries and more than 700,000 residents of Adams, Columbia, Dane, Green, Portage, Sauk, and Wood Counties. I am here to urge you to recommend restoration of dollars for an increase in Public Library System aids to the biennial budget bill now before the legislature.

Public Library System aids were not increased by even a single penny in the Governor's budget proposal for either year of the biennium. This represents a catastrophic blow to services that have taken over a quarter of a century to build.

The state made a bargain many years ago with its counties and municipalities. If they would fund library service to ensure that every Wisconsin resident had free access to a public library, then the state would, in turn, fund Public Library Systems at an amount equal to 13% of the previous year's local library expenditures. This represented an excellent value for the state, in that Wisconsin's residents received a dollar's worth of library service for a state expenditure of only 13¢. It was a benefit to localities because it at least enabled their libraries to afford service enhancements such as automated resource sharing systems, which were beyond the means of all but the largest libraries of the day. At present, Public Library Systems are not funded at the 13% level contained in the statutes. They are instead funded only at 10.1%. If the current budget proposal goes through the legislature unchanged, system funding will drop to 9.5% in the first year of the biennium, and to less than 9% in the second.

Public Library Systems are a very cost-effective way to provide library service to the citizens of Wisconsin. For instance, the number of interlibrary loans in the South Central System (that is, books borrowed from one library for the customers of another) reached almost 1.2 million this year. Each book requested through interlibrary loan represents an item that the borrowing library does not have to buy. A library book (averaging in the price of everything from paperbacks to reference books) costs in excess of \$20. 1.2 million interlibrary loans times \$20 per book represents a cost savings of \$24 million annually to our member libraries and the citizens who fund them.

Of course, to operate interlibrary loan effectively, you must have an adequate delivery system. Last year, South Central Library System vans carried some 6.9 million items

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among libraries of all types throughout the state. Our delivery service cost just over \$1.15 million to operate. This works out to just under 17¢ per item delivered, a vastly less expensive solution than the US mail, which costs almost \$2.40 per book sent, including packaging and labor. Our delivery system thus represents a further cost savings of over \$15 million annually to the taxpayers of Wisconsin.

But as cost-effective as Public Library Systems are, increasing service demands from the public have still stretched us to the limit. The total number of interloan requests within South Central has been increasing by almost 200,000 (17%) per year, and shows no sign of leveling off. Our statewide delivery volume has increased by 1.6 million over the last two years (27%), and as more and more libraries automate, there is no reason to expect that this rate of increase will not continue. Our LINK automated system, which makes extensive resource sharing in the South Central area possible, was brought on-line in 1994. Its antiquated technology no longer meets many public needs, and it must be replaced in 2002. South Central borrowed \$400,000 in 1994 to help its member libraries underwrite the LINK system. Were we to take out such a loan again, without added funding, how would we pay it back? Last, but not least, I must mention our employees. In many budgets, cost of living increases are just assumed. They will happen whether the discretionary portion of the budget goes up or not. Not so with Public Library Systems. We are not taxing bodies, nor do we have some separate reserve upon which we can draw to fund staff expenses. Our Public Library System funding is all we get, and if we cannot afford even cost of living increases, then we can expect to see our carefully crafted teams of experts dissolve as our best employees seek the money to feed their families elsewhere.

The ostensible reason for the lack of any increased funding for Public Library Systems in the proposed budget is that there simply isn't any money. In accordance with the budget priorities currently contained in the document, this is true. For instance, the additional \$200 million proposed for corrections, three new highway projects costing in excess of \$292 million, and the more than \$80 million in new tax breaks proposed for corporations don't leave much wiggle room. But the key word here is priorities, and priorities can be changed. Even the additional \$11 million required to fund Public Library Systems at the full 13% statutory level makes hardly a ripple in the \$46 billion fiscal pond that is the state biennial budget. And frankly, the library community would settle for far less than 11 million dollars.

This is perhaps one of the most difficult budgets Wisconsin has faced in many years. Despite that, we must plead with you not to turn your back on a program that has served Wisconsin so well for over a quarter of a century. The future of Wisconsin's Public Library Systems is in your hands. Thank you for your consideration.