

## Public Library Districts: An Alternative for Wisconsin?

By Greta Thompson, OWLS

You are probably aware that the Wisconsin Library Association (WLA), with the support of the System and Resource Library Administrators' Association of Wisconsin (SRLAAW) and other groups, is hoping to introduce legislation in January that would permit the creation of public library districts in Wisconsin. But you may not know much more than this. I hope this article will serve as a basic introduction to library districts.

A library district is an alternative to municipal or county libraries in structure and in funding. Currently most public libraries in Wisconsin are created and funded by municipalities. A few are countywide, e.g., the Brown County library with its multiple branches. A handful are tribal libraries (e.g., Oneida) or joint libraries (e.g., the libraries in Kimberly and Little Chute, which are governed by one board and funded by both municipalities).



**The size of a library district is variable.** A library district in Wisconsin would require a minimum of 4000 residents, but it could be as simple as one library or one library and its branches in a single municipality. It could encompass more than one municipality or more than one county, provided the municipalities or counties are adjacent to each other. It could include municipalities that are presently without any libraries. The boundaries of districts, therefore, would not necessarily coincide with other jurisdictions.

**A library district is an independent taxing unit.** Residents establish (and increase) the funding level of a library district by referendum. The fact that a district can levy taxes is a major reason for its appeal now when the state, the municipalities, and the counties are all hard-pressed financially. Traditionally, library districts are often funded more generously than municipal or county libraries. People may be willing to pay more for library services than they are to pay for some other services.

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**A library district is governed by its own board**, whose members are generally elected by the district's residents. The board is autonomous with powers similar to those held by municipal and county governing bodies, but focused exclusively on libraries: buildings, personnel, services, and funding.

The proposed legislation for Wisconsin calls for the establishment of a planning committee. Its composition would depend on the unit(s) involved in the proposed district, but would always include representatives from the affected library board(s). The committee would develop a detailed plan for the establishment and initial operation of the proposed district, including the initial property tax levy rate, procedures for transferring employees and title to property, and personnel salaries and benefits.

The Department of Public Instruction would review the plan and write an opinion stating whether the plan was feasible and whether it met statutory requirements. But whether or not the district proposed in the final plan was approved would be determined by the voters living in the area of the proposed district.

In a presentation to the Arrowhead Library System last spring Larry Nix, the former Director of Public Library Development for the Division for Libraries, Technologies, and Community Learning, said that the supporters of library districts in Wisconsin do not anticipate that they would be implemented on a large scale in the state. They would be another alternative to municipal libraries (341 of Wisconsin's public libraries), much like county, joint, or tribal libraries (47 of the state's public libraries). Districts might be appealing for such reasons as offering a possible solution to the non-residential borrowing problems that exist in the state; providing improved and more equitable library service in an area; and sharing the costs of capital projects more equitably.

On the other hand, Nix continues, library districts might have disadvantages: for example, duties for both the library administration and staff and the district board would increase; some libraries would not want to consolidate, which is a necessary step in realizing some of the major benefits of library districts; and current trustees may not welcome the idea of running for office.

This is only an overview of the issues involved in public library districts. For more information, including the complete presentation by Larry Nix and two articles by Tom Hennen, visit WLA's web site: <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/legis/districts.htm>.



## ***Stand Up for Libraries*** ***Attend Library Legislative Day***

**Mark your calendars now for the Wisconsin Library Association's Library Legislation Day in Madison on Tuesday February 8, 2005. This is a great opportunity for library supporters to talk with their State Legislators about the importance of library support.**

Ask your library director or go to <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/legis/index.htm> for more information.

# How the State Budget Affects Your Library

By Mark Arend, Winnefox Library System

Unlike some states, Wisconsin does not fund public libraries directly. But there are provisions in the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) budget that directly effect how your library delivers services.

**System aids:** Library systems are established and funded to provide services to local libraries. Among the services your library receives from its system are:

- ♦ staff continuing education
- ♦ interlibrary loan and reference backup
- ♦ in-system delivery of materials
- ♦ consulting and general assistance to library directors and trustees

Although statute requires the DPI to request funding equal to 13% of the amount spent by local governments for library service, the legislature has never funded systems at this level and in recent years system funding has been static or decreasing, resulting in a loss of system services to local libraries.

**Badgerlink:** Badgerlink provides Wisconsin residents with access to quality online information from home, school, or office as well as from the library. The contracts with 2 vendors (ESBSCO and ProQuest) provide access to over 6,500 magazines and newspapers, many in full text. This service is used extensively with more than eight million searches conducted annually. It is estimated that providing this service through a statewide contract saves at least \$66 million, compared to what would be spent if libraries contracted separately for the service.

**Delivery services:** To encourage sharing between libraries Wisconsin has a delivery service reaching every library. Each system's delivery program connects its members and an intersystem service connects the 17 systems. This has been found to be the most economical way of transporting materials between libraries.

**Library Service Contracts:** Contracts with the Wisconsin Library Services (WiLS), and the Milwaukee Public Library insures that state residents have interlibrary loan access to the specialized collections of the State Historical Society, the UW-Madison Libraries, and the Milwaukee Public Library. The Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped provides talking books free of charge to residents who cannot read printed books due to a visual or other physical disability. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) is a repository of children's books used by librarians and teachers

throughout the state and provides unique resources and services to educators and others in freedom of information cases.

In her "State of Education" speech Superintendent Burmaster said: "In Wisconsin, our public libraries have long been centers of our communities and now also provide high-tech free access to information. State funding has fallen to 8.2%, the lowest level in 20 years. Continuing to underfund our public libraries puts at risk our program of library access, resource sharing, and quality services. Our libraries are being used now in more ways by more people than ever before. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise."

Over the next six months the Governor and Legislature will be setting the state budget for the 2005-2007 biennium. They need to hear what services citizens consider important.



# John Debacher is New Public Library Consultant

John DeBacher has been appointed to the position of Consultant for Public Library Administration with the Wisconsin Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning. John brings a wealth of experience to this position; he has been Director of the Monona Public Library and the Big Rapids (Michigan) Community Library, and worked for the Chicago Public Library and the Center for Children's Books. At the Monona Public Library, John expanded services, supervised a major renovation and expansion

of the library, and established the state's first distance learning classroom in a public library. John will be a great resource for library directors and trustees. He can be reached at [john.debacher@dpi.state.wi.us](mailto:john.debacher@dpi.state.wi.us) (608) 266-7270

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