

THE CHALLENGE OF WIDER LIBRARY

Last year, Louisville, KY, grew overnight from the country's 64th largest city to the 16th largest, the result of the merger of the city with Jefferson County. Pittsburgh and Buffalo, NY, are among other communities discussing city-county mergers. Many smaller communities are considering merging services, such as police and fire, or consolidating separate communities into a single larger entity.

Budget pressures and the desire to eliminate needless duplication fuel such plans. Most attempts stumble on tax equity or power-sharing grounds. Libraries have not usually been in the forefront of such discussions because they are generally such a small piece of the total tax burden.

If these cuts are merely cyclical, then library leaders can continue old strategies that allow, if not encourage, fragmentation, tax disparities, and duplication of service. If, as I believe, we face a realignment of government funding and services, then we need radical changes in strategy. Wider units, referenda, regional taxes, and state or regional revenue sharing will become critically important.

This idea has gained momentum. As Kalamazoo Public Library director Saul Amdursky wrote in "The Case for Consolidation" (*LJ* 2/1/04, p. 38-40), "we need fewer libraries with greater independence." He referred to the number of administrative units, not library outlets, and called for independent library taxing districts encompassing multiple units of local government. There is a strong correlation between districts and better funding levels, as I have written ("Are Wider Library Units Wiser?" *American Libraries*, June/July 2002).

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John Berry's editorials (*LJ* 6/15/02, p. 8, and *LJ* 2/1/04, p. 8) echo that message. Amdursky joined me and Lee Brawner, former director of Oklahoma County's Metropolitan Library System, in calling for the American Library Association (ALA) to prioritize model district legislation.

Legislative action needed

Libraries in many areas are considering districts or other forms of organization and funding for libraries. I recently consulted on a major analysis of library needs in the Kansas City metro area, where a library district is under discussion (see "Making Book" on Metro KC Libraries," p. 38). Denver officials are also looking at how a district might provide dedicated funding.

Though Kansas City's challenges are compounded by the need to consider a metropolitan area in two states, its basic situation is not unique. Problems of fragmentation, the loss of tax capacity in the center city, and the duplication of services are found in most metropolitan areas. The KC Consensus report makes five recommendations. All require action by the Missouri and Kansas legislatures and substantial leadership by state and local library leaders. The recommendations are to merge existing libraries, increase state funds, provide for referenda, change library boundaries, and establish regional taxes.

Merge existing libraries

Dan Bradbury, the former director of the Kansas City PL, MO, called for a merger of his library with the suburban Mid-Continent PL. The KC Consensus board stopped short of recommending that, endorsing only the consideration of merger by the smaller libraries in the area with their larger neighbors.

The situation highlights the shift in power between city and suburbs. Half a century ago, many struggling suburban systems urged mergers with then-stronger city libraries,

which resisted the call. City library leaders thought the suburbs brought few assets and would drain resources from the central library. Today, after substantial changes to the political structure and simultaneous erosion of the tax base, the positions are often reversed. Suburban officials fear the same drain and recognize that the eroded tax base in central cities would require the suburbs to increase their library taxes to support the central city library operations.

Merging libraries and developing taxing districts may be a way to stabilize funding, but the path is not always clear

By Thomas J. Hennen Jr.

UNITS

Possible mergers and districts nationwide are quickly stalled by the tax capacity issue, as most cities have lower relative tax bases than their suburban neighbors. Some communities rely on hotel room taxes, local income taxes, and sales taxes, but the differences in tax capacity usually remain. Some communities are more affluent than others—it's as simple as that.

Tensions heighten when a city library borders a consolidated suburban system with many branches, as in Kansas City or the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. They also exist when independent libraries surround a central city library, as in Chicago, New

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York City, or Milwaukee. A merger is probably easier between a city library and a consolidated suburban library than with scores of suburban libraries, which have widely divergent tax rates.

The issue of autonomy also stalls mergers. It is human nature to try not to give up current authority even for a greater good. It is unlikely that any of the small libraries in the Kansas City area or elsewhere will sacrifice their autonomy even if it can be shown to be more efficient. Such mergers can only be accomplished with incentives, such as state funds to encourage mergers, or pressures from municipal or county officials.

There are further impediments to wider units, unmentioned by Amdursky, notably buildings and capital expenses. New buildings in a municipality often rely on substantial donations. Donors remain far more inclined to give to an

independent library in their home town than to a branch of a wider organization. It's much harder, though not impossible, to raise money for a branch or outlet of a regional library system. Also, library staff, directors, and boards fear for their own jobs and prerogatives, and their invocation of local autonomy can be just a diversion. The public values quality services over autonomy for its own sake. Library professionals should have the same values.

The KC Consensus suggestions for changing the boundaries of the KCPL, MO, are understandable. It is highly unusual for a city library to include only a small portion of the city in its tax base. In many cities, library planners would like to be able to annex land and expand their tax base. This is unlikely because in nearly all such cases adjacent suburban communities have independent libraries or branches served by a consolidated system.

As a practical matter, annexations by cities of adjacent communities are unlikely in most political configurations. State legislatures must approve such boundary changes and suburban legislators usually have enough clout to stop them. For further information on wider library units, go to www.haplr-index.com/wider_and_wiser_units.htm.

State funding

The KC Consensus report notes that Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida have leveraged state funding to encourage regional library development and equalize funding levels for communities with low tax capacity.

While pressures on state budgets mean state funding is unlikely to change soon, we should assess long-term strategies and alliances for when state economies recover. Wisconsin is using federal Library Service and Technology Act funds to investigate district libraries in six areas of the state. Only one study has been completed, but additional recommendations are being developed on what Wisconsin's library district law should look like. Next year, district legislation should be introduced, and the Wisconsin Library Association will be lobbying extensively for its passage.

The decay of inner-ring suburbs presents an opportunity to rethink metropolitan strategies. The development of metropolitan areas, driven largely by free-ways and suburban home development, is cyclical. While many cities hit bottom years ago and are beginning to regenerate their infrastructure, many inner-ring suburbs are just beginning to face the problems that cities confronted. Older suburbs face the decay of their infrastructure and housing base with considerably fewer resources than cities had, because they lack urban business and cultural resources. Myron Orfield of the Metropolitan Area Research Corporation, a nonprofit group, thinks these circumstances promote wider governmental cooperation.

People in suburbs may have higher incomes and better services than most people in cities, but a thriving city is obviously a better neighbor than a failing one. Library leaders should ignore knee-jerk rivalries that surface when discussions about mergers, districts, and sharing begin and consider

the converging interests of cities and older suburbs and the need for regional planning solutions.

Referendum authority & legislation

Only 40 percent of our states have legislation that allows district libraries, so we need model district laws. When libraries can go directly to the voters rather than compete with other agencies for municipal funding, the results are nearly always better. In Kansas City, the KC Consensus planners recommend asking voters for tax support, noting that Missouri allows districts while Kansas does not. I serve on the committee that drafted proposed library district legislation for Wisconsin. We tried to use the elements of other states' laws to come up with a law that met state needs. It may not be the model law that ALA should develop, but it should help in the process. Copies of the draft legislation as well as a summary of its points are available on my web site (www.haplr-index.com/public_library_district_legislat.htm).

Regional tax

The consensus report recommends consideration of a regional tax to be shared by all participants in the Kansas City region, without consolidating libraries. In some cases, a county or parish could be the taxing authority. Perhaps regional planning agencies with limited authority for tax collection for narrowly defined taxing purposes could play a role. Taxing for shared library services on a regional basis would require a change in focus, if not a change in law, for most areas of the country. KC Consensus says, in essence, that if the funding mechanism is regional, mergers may not be necessary. Shared, regional funding might allow even small libraries to offer big-time services and could help sidestep (often acrimonious) discussions about merging.

The System and Resource Library Administrators' Association of Wisconsin in March 2004 recommended a County Shared Library Services Levy. The proposed legislation would give counties, rather than a region, the authority to tax for shared

services in that county. While this may not be the first such tax in the country, it would certainly be a rarity. Technology and traffic patterns push us to get beyond old methods and paradigms. It is not always easy to do so, as we saw recently in Waukesha County. Our plan to spread capital costs more equally around the county was passed overwhelmingly by the county board, only to be vetoed by the county executive (see News, p. 16). But that was just one setback in a series of advances. To succeed for libraries and their users, library leaders must take risks with bold new programs, but taking risks will not result in success every time.

Another step

The Kansas City Consensus study represents another step in the important move toward library districts, accenting Am-dursky's argument. Every area of the nation could benefit from the model used: working with a respected public research group assisted by professional librarians to study tough regional planning issues. Most metropolitan areas of the country could address similar options.

In Wisconsin, we've begun to propose district legislation as well as legislation for taxing shared services. Library leaders around the country must look at these issues, considering the possibility of consolidating library service programs or, at the least, providing a legislative framework that would allow groups of local libraries to combine. Even though we have vastly improved our technological base, most libraries must still rely on 19th-century governance and tax structures. It is time for libraries to move into the 21st century with well-planned library districts. We can't be left behind. ■

"Making Book" on Metro KC Libraries

By Jennifer Wilding

KC Consensus, a citizens league that involves the community in policy decisions, asked: Given that geographical boundaries are increasingly meaningless, how should a library structure dating back more than a century adapt? While the question seems natural, we were challenged because of the lack of comparative studies.

Metro Kansas City sprawls over 18 counties in Missouri and Kansas. We focused on five "core" counties, three in Missouri and two in Kansas, which include seven library districts. The Kansas City Public Library, KS, and the Johnson County Library, KS, both cover most of one county. The Mid-Continent Public Library includes most of three counties and almost half of the population. The Kansas City Public Library (KCPL), MO, the region's oldest, can tax just 87 square miles, including one-quarter of the city's territory; the rest of the county is served by Mid-Continent and another, smaller library.

Our libraries rely significantly on local funding. While libraries nationwide get an average of 77 percent of their operating budgets from local sources and 13 percent from their states, in this region the figures are 90 percent and 1.5 percent. Local funds come from the property tax, so library budgets are closely tied to their jurisdiction's tax capacity.

Action is needed

The Consensus board identified several options for action.

WIDER UNITS OF SERVICE The KCPL serves the region but can only tax a fraction of residents. Still, the board doesn't recommend a merger with the nearby multicounty library. It suggests two options: expand the library's boundaries to include the entire county or expand the taxing area to provide regional or state funding for its collections. Three small libraries serve less than eight percent of the population; while it would be efficient for them to merge, they must initiate such a merger rather than have it imposed on them.

STATE FUNDING The states should provide ten percent of operating budgets.

REGIONAL TAX A bistate sales tax should be passed to fund technology and regional projects.

KANSAS MILL LEVIES The State of Kansas should make its libraries independent taxing districts, as in Missouri.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH State leaders should consider new methods of funding libraries that rely less on local support and assist areas with low tax capacity.

The next step for Consensus is to convene citizens to review the report and agree on what should be done.

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