

Library Service in the 21st Century: A County-Wide Conversation about Public Libraries

We Need South Park to be a Part of the Conversation

Please Read as this Could Impact Library Services in our Community

In November of 2013 municipal managers, library boards and directors were invited to a symposium entitled “The Future of Our Libraries” presented by the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute of Politics Fiscal Policy and Governance Committee. The symposium was coordinated by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County Library Association.

The symposium was the kick-off event of an eight month process of evaluating library service on a county-wide level. The process will be guided by a consultant, Nicole Swerhun of Toronto Canada. A “Blue Ribbon Taskforce” of four representatives selected by the Allegheny County Library Association and four representative selected by Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, as well as a representative from the Buhl Foundation will provide overall leadership to the process. Driving this process is a recent performance evaluation of the Allegheny County Library Association by the Regional Asset District and the development of the new Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh’s Strategic Plan.

Ms. Swerhun, from conversations with Allegheny County Library Association and Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh has presented five problems that county-wide library service in Allegheny County faces in the 21st century and has asked Allegheny County residents to help provide solutions. These problems are as follows:

1. Increased competition for public funding for all levels
2. Changes in technology
3. Changes in State library regulations (Libraries will be required to meet state standards)
4. Increased need for library service to underserved areas of the county
5. Increased demand for skilled librarians

A common factor in all the problems is funding. Changes in technology drive funding decisions. State library regulations may require libraries, who may not currently be operating to standards to increase funding. Servicing communities that do not support libraries can be financially taxing, as well as the hiring of professional library staff.

The South Park Township public library is one of 44 independently funded and governed Allegheny County libraries that comprise the Allegheny County Library Association (ACLA), a federated library consortium. ACLA is a non-profit organization that maintains an administrative body and board of trustees.

Our library, like all county libraries is funded by municipal tax dollars, Regional Asset District tax dollars (1% sales tax) and by State tax dollars through State appropriated library funding.

Each library in Allegheny County is as unique as the communities they serve. The funding libraries receive is reflective of their diversity. Local municipal funding for each county library varies from \$.16 to \$42.39 per capita. Regional Asset District funding is distributed based upon a formula that includes factors such as; population, community distress, usage of materials and computers, and municipal contribution incentives. State funds are currently distributed by population, although the state plans to implement a formula in the future.

The South Park Township library receives \$25.79 per capita funding from its municipality. Local Township funding accounts for over 60% of our budget, while RAD funding accounts for 22% of our budget. We are fortunate to reside within a community that values its library. There are communities within Allegheny County that have significant operating budgets that contribute far less. There are communities in Allegheny County that do not support a library, nor contribute to surrounding communities that have libraries that service their patrons.

We proud of our community and the library that has found a place within it.

Our Library:

- 🕒 Is a department of its local government. It is community owned and governed. One of only two in the whole of Allegheny County.
- 🕒 Is well used. In the last ten years our library has seen over a 100% increase in the circulation of our materials over our front desk. 9.2 library items per South Park resident were checked out last year.
- 🕒 Is improved by the community it serves. Our library is unique and responsive to the needs and requests of South Park residents. Many of our programs are developed by or presented by community members. Our residents love our programs as well 44% of our residents have attended a library program in the past year. Over 200 residents attend each of our annual family-based programs. Over 200 guests attended our three community organized teas.
- 🕒 Is a great place to browse. We are proud of our unique and diverse collection. We have a formidable collection for our size. The library dedicates 21.4% of its overall budget to collection development. The American Library Association documents the national average at 11.7%. We have one of the highest dedicated collection budgets in Allegheny County. The strength of collection is evident countywide as we lending of materials to other county libraries is 72%

greater than our borrowing of other libraries materials. We are one of the strongest lending libraries in Allegheny County.

We are Unique but We Share Services Countywide:

- ⌚ Countywide access to all materials via a shared online catalog and delivery system
- ⌚ Digital access to e-resources (e-books, e-audio, and e-video)
- ⌚ Access to quality computers and devices and high speed internet and Wi-Fi access.

Funding countywide services are important to our local libraries. These services make us stronger. We could not afford to provide the quality of these shared services without collaborative funding. The combination of a locally-driven, governed libraries that are responsive and unique to their communities in conjunction with shared county wide services make our county libraries special. We are both neighborhood assets with broad access to the larger county.

Our libraries could become stronger by:

- ⌚ Making RAD more sustainable by leveraging more local funding from communities that under-support their libraries. This means that communities that have the means to give that do not give. A mechanism must be in place to ensure a standard level of giving across the county.
- ⌚ The county should require communities that do not support basic services, such as libraries, to contribute extra tax dollars. These funds would be used to supplement the burden of communities that support unfunded services to non-residents.
- ⌚ The State should provide a mechanism to secure additional tax dollars from communities that do not support a library. These funds should be distributed to communities that provide these services.
- ⌚ An evaluation of distressed communities and their need for funding must be undertaken. Each distressed community should be studied to determine its actual funding needs. More emphasis should be given to developing distressed libraries within their communities. Emphasis should be on building grass roots organizations, creating strategic plans for donors and establishing partnerships with stronger neighboring libraries.
- ⌚ Reduce county level administrative funding costs. Invest more money directly into libraries and the communities they serve within the Allegheny County Library Association.
- ⌚ Explore corporate funding options to aid in the support of county-wide library services. County-wide services such as; shipping of materials and electronic and digital delivery could be desirable

corporate funding opportunities. Explore endowment options for county-wide services to ensure its future.

- ⌚ Maintain the local community library. The social connections it provides are essential and eternal regardless of how the services that it offers may evolve.

The South Park Public Library will be hosting a community informational session regarding this process on Wednesday, February 12th from 7:00-8:00 p.m. at the South Park Township Board Room. We invite our residents to attend and participate in strengthening our library in the 21st century.

If you are unable to attend this community meeting you may participate in the conversation by responding to these questions online at

www.countycitylibraries.org