



Senate Indicates Its Budget Will Increase Public Library Fund

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A number of senators have submitted amendments to the biennial budget bill that will increase the Ohio Public Library Fund (PLF) to 1.7 percent of the General Revenue Fund after a House reduction, though representatives of the state's libraries said they hoped to see that set in permanent law rather than temporary law.

Michelle Francis, executive director of the Ohio Library Council (OLC), Jay Smith, OLC's director of government and legal services, and Tracy Strobel, executive director of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, testified Wednesday before the Senate Finance Committee, asking for funding to be restored in HB110 (Oelslager) after the House declined to extend the current 1.7 percent temporary law provision, meaning funding would revert to 1.66 percent of the General Revenue Fund.

The witnesses told the Senate about the services libraries have been providing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Francis noting one library in Southeast Ohio was seeing 50 percent of its wi-fi usage coming when the library was closed pre-pandemic. During the pandemic, libraries became a hub of services to students, families and businesses. Job seekers would use the facilities for job searches and online training, or to fill out the online paperwork to start a business.

Some libraries lent iPads to nursing home residents so they could keep in touch with family members during the lock down, she said. Francis cited one instance where a patron set up a card table in the parking lot of a library, complete with computer and printer, and even ordered a sandwich to be delivered, so he could use the library's wi-fi to attend his online class for that evening.

The witnesses said their funding has not been at 1.66 percent of the GRF since 2015.

"State funding through the PLF is critically important because it remains a primary source of revenue for public libraries. Statewide, more than 48 percent of the total funding for Ohio's public libraries comes from the state through the PLF. In addition, 20 percent of Ohio's public

library systems (50 of 251) do not have a local property tax levy and rely solely on their state funding as their main source of revenue for day-to-day operations," Smith said in his testimony.

"As a reminder, our libraries are separate political subdivisions, similar to our other local government partners, but we do not have taxing authority to implement a local sales tax or income tax. Also, unlike counties, cities and school districts, public libraries do not receive casino revenue. Therefore, we are concerned that HB110 proposes to reduce the PLF to the same rate as the Local Government Fund (LGF)."

The witnesses said there had been confusion over libraries getting funds from the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP). Smith said libraries are not receiving \$170 million, but instead \$200 million is going to libraries nationwide through the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services. Of that amount, the State Library of Ohio will receive an estimated \$4.5 million to divide among university academic libraries, K-12 school libraries, prison libraries, and OLC members. He also added that even though public libraries are separate political divisions in the state, they are not receiving the billions of dollars other local government units are getting directly through ARP.

Sen. Nickie Antonio (D-Lakewood) asked why Legislative Service Commission (LSC) estimates showed a large discrepancy in revenue estimates versus actual distribution. Francis said often those estimates don't take into account an automatic \$5 million that is taken off the top that goes to the Library for the Blind and the Ohio Library Public Information Network, which pays for network connections to main library buildings.

She also said that there is a fluctuation because of the income tax filing delay last year. She also told Antonio about the confusion surrounding the ARP funds, noting that the House Finance Committee called OLC back to testify to answer additional questions about it. She said Ohio is different from other states when it comes to libraries, as they are separate entities, but the federal government does not recognize that.

She noted that there were additional questions about revenue estimates, but added that in six of the last seven years, they failed to realize those dollars and lost out more than \$90 million. Committee Chairman Matt Dolan (R-Chagrin Falls) said the House might not see it as a cut, but instead returning the PLF to its statutory amount, as previous increases were in temporary law.

He said amendments he has drafted as well as one from Antonio would increase that amount back up to 1.7 percent, as OLC is requesting. Francis said the Senate has always been the chamber that has ensured they receive more, again noting that the fund has not been at 1.66 percent since 2015.

She said it is a partnership with the state, and it would be nice to have the increase in permanent law, noting that they go through a similar process of having to fight for an increase every budget cycle because it is only in temporary law.