



Libraries Press Senate To Reverse House Funding Cut

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Library officials on Wednesday pressed their case for additional state-level funding.

Their calls came during the [Senate Finance](#) Committee's fifth hearing on the state operating budget ([HB 110](#)), which would reduce the Public Library Fund from 1.7% of the General Revenue Fund to 1.66%.

Michelle Francis, executive director of the Ohio Library Council, said the PLF has not been set at that reduced rate since Fiscal Year 2015.

At the current level, she said, the PLF will decrease by 0.5% in FY 2022 and 3.5% in FY 2023.

"However, these estimates are based on assumed growth in Ohio's economy and the assumption that no additional policy changes will impact the GRF," she said. "Most often, libraries do not realize these estimates. Only once in the past seven years has the PLF met the estimates included in budget documents."

[Sen. Nickie Antonio](#) (D-Lakewood) questioned the discrepancy between estimates and distribution, leading Ms. Francis to say that part of issue is that \$5 million automatically comes off the top to pay for the Library for the Blind and the Ohio Public Library Information Network.

She added that last year's delayed tax filing deadline also had an impact.

Ms. Francis explained that 48% of the total funding for public libraries comes from the state through the PLF. Fifty public library systems do not have a property tax levy and rely solely on state funding, she added.

In response to chairman [Sen. Matt Dolan](#) (R-Chagrin Falls) noting the House change puts the funding level at the statutory amount, Ms. Francis said the OLC would like to see the 1.7% figure enshrined into law.

She also sought to dispel the notion that libraries are set to receive a windfall in federal funding.

Through the American Rescue Plan, the state is in line to receive an estimated \$4.5 million to be divided among university academic libraries, K-12 libraries, prison libraries and public libraries, she explained.

Tracy Strobel, executive director of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, said the PLF represents about 25% of her library system's operating budget.

Under the current version of the budget, she said, the CCPL stands to lose \$2.1 million, while statewide the losses total \$22 million.

"This is not the time to decrease the Public Library Fund. As Ohioans come out of the COVID-19 pandemic, their needs around workforce development, support for K-12 students, and long-term solutions to the digital divide are only set to grow," she said. "Our public libraries are well positioned to support the job seekers, students, families, and seniors whose lives have been most impacted by the pandemic."

Jeff Trzeciak, executive director of the Dayton Metro Library, said that the proposed reduction in the PLF combined with an income tax cut in the spending outline will doubly disadvantage public libraries while costs are rising.

"Libraries have done so much to serve Ohio during COVID," he said. "Now, with special resources and programming to support Ohio's recovery, we simply can't afford a funding cut."

Chris May, director and fiscal officer at the Mansfield/Richland County Public Library, said the state's public libraries have the highest per capita use in the nation.

"We have the highest percentage of registered borrowers, highest number of visits, and highest circulation," he said. "Libraries are open to all and a resource that Ohio's citizens increasingly turn to for vital services. Our success is dependent on the strong partnership between the state and the local library systems."

Jonathan Harris, director of the Portage County District Library, said his library system has been operating under a reduction in service hours and locations dating back to 2009 when the PLF was cut from 2.22% of the GRF.

"Despite these budget setbacks, we have endeavored to be vital partners in statewide recovery initiatives. Our partnership with OhioMeansJobs has helped our library get Ohioans back to work. Our partnership with the Governor's Imagination Library has helped provide early literacy resources all across our district. And we have worked as a bridge across the digital divide by providing computer access, Wi-Fi, and mobile hotspots for families who have found their lives upended by the pandemic," he said.

"During the time when stay-at-home orders were in place, our system even installed some of those mobile internet hotspots into our pickup lockers in rural areas, working to increase internet access across our district. We have done these things while simultaneously providing our core services to educate, enrich, and inspire our communities."

The panel also received interested party testimony from representatives of the libraries in Sandusky, Lima, Mentor, Stark County, Akron and the Harris-Elmore Public Library & Genoa Branch.