

May 19, 2021

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Jonathan Harris, and I am the Director of the Portage County District Library. Our system, which covers all of Portage County, with the exception of the Kent and Ravenna City School Districts, is one of the 50 public library systems in the state which does not have a local property tax levy to support the library. This means that our system relies entirely on Ohio's Public Library Fund for our operating revenue. Over one-tenth of the almost one million Ohioans who are served by PLF-only libraries reside in our service district.

Our library is currently operating under a reduction in service hours and locations that dates back to 2009, when the PLF was cut from 2.22% of the General Revenue Fund. Our system comprises five branch locations, with three of those open 40 hours a week, and two open 25 hours a week. Many of these locations are closed on Thursdays and Sundays due to budgetary constraints. Our sixth branch, in Brimfield, was permanently closed as a result of those budget cuts.

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, wifi, and mobile hotspots for families who have found their lives upended by the pandemic. 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.

I feel that it is important to stress to the committee that after 12 years of sustained reductions to the PLF, our system has quite simply run out of things to cut. This comes at a time when we have also seen a sharp rise in the cost of providing our services, particularly ebooks and other online content. The reality of the current situation is that keeping the PLF at its current rate of 1.7% and holding public libraries harmless from potential tax cuts is not a magic bullet. For us, this is not a matter of our system being able to restore hours or locations, it is making sure that another community does not lose their library.

I wish to thank the Senators for their time today. I am happy to answer any questions and have included my contact information below.

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