SHELF HELP

Supporting Local Libraries Helps Townships Create Strong Communities

Contrary to popular belief, not all community libraries are on their way out in this digital age. They do need help, however, as rising costs and slashed state funding make it difficult to cover expenses. Township support for libraries is more important than ever, whether through financial or in-kind contributions, services, or just plain space.

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSISTANT EDITOR
The Wilcox Public Library in Jones Township, Elk County, had to find a new home. It had already outgrown two: a dilapidated former drugstore and an old refurbished bank.

“The library was all volunteer until 2001, when it became part of the state library system,” Jones Township supervisor Laurie Storrar says.

And by the late 2000s, the library needed to move again. The Wilcox Area Development Corporation worked with the township and the library to purchase its original location, the old drugstore, which had gone into foreclosure. Multiple grants and donations enabled the building to be restored, and it reopened in 2009, boasting original shelving and a pharmacy counter from the defunct drugstore, plus an old hotel's candy case, which separates the children's area from the book shelves.

In addition to helping the library secure its new home, Jones Township supports it through a dedicated tax of 0.4 mills, Storrar says, which was approved by voter referendum in 2006. Last year, the township also gave the library $10,000 from its Act 13 impact fee funding.

“The millage and what money the library gets from the state library system don’t add up to much,” Storrar says.

To help meet operating costs, the library sends out an annual donation letter to residents and participates in an annual Cash Bash for nonprofit organizations, which generates about $1,500 for the library. Funding always remains a struggle, though.

Wilcox Public Library is not alone. Public libraries in general are struggling, in part because state funding has been flatlined for about 10 years, says Christi Buker, executive director of the Pennsylvania Library Association. State funding represents about 16 percent of libraries’ income, and county and municipal funding make up the rest. Municipalities can’t always give as much as libraries need, though.

“Expenses never stop increasing, however, and libraries don’t want to compromise the services they provide to patrons and the community,” Buker says. “More and more are talking about having to close or explore other means of funding.”

Many townships offer financial support to their local library, whether through a dedicated tax millage, an annual donation, or other means. Others have found different ways to offer support, such as providing space and sharing services, including maintenance and communications and marketing.

All kinds of support are welcome, Buker says, and by helping their libraries, townships are also helping themselves. Strong libraries make strong communities, she says, and if townships and libraries work together toward that goal, it’s a win-win.

Funding is biggest challenge

Funding for public libraries in Pennsylvania is at an all-time low. The commonwealth used to rank in the top five states for public library funding — now it ranks 49th, says Cathi Alloway, library director for the Schlow Centre Region Library in State College.

“Funding is always a library’s biggest challenge,” she says.

Townships do what they can to help. Some, like Jones Township, levy a dedicated library tax or allocate a percentage of property tax revenue to support these community resources.

Rye Township in Perry County supports the library in neighboring Marysville Borough by giving .01 mills of its .9-mill property tax to the organization in quarterly distributions, secretary-treasurer Daisy Lightner says. The township also makes an annual donation. The combined total in 2018 was about $3,560, or roughly $1.50 per capita.

At the other end of the spectrum, Cranberry Township in Butler County has a 1 mill dedicated library tax, which generates about $425,000 per year and covers the library’s operational expenses.

“The library is extremely important to the community and fits into the board of supervisors’ commitment to a sustainable, healthy community,” manager Jerry Andree says.

A dedicated library tax can be a hard sell, though, both to the public and township officials. Voters in Oley Township, Berks County, approved a
referendum last November that will levy a tax of .09 mills to fund the Oley Valley Community Library. The tax will equate to $5 per capita, which will allow the library to achieve state recognition, making it eligible for state aid and grants.

Two of the township supervisors had misgivings about further burdening property owners, according to the Reading Eagle. Supervisor James Coker told the paper that he was disappointed with the 2:1 vote in favor of the tax. “I still feel a property tax to fund the library as well as schools is unfair,” he said. “I think the voters failed to realize that this tax does not go away and as usual with property assessments, is likely to go up.”

The library, begun as a community initiative in 2011, was previously run as a nonprofit supported by donations, including the township’s annual $1,500 contribution. A similar ballot measure failed by 19 votes in 2014.

Voters in Jones Township, Elk County, also voted down a dedicated tax when it first appeared on the ballot, supervisor Laurie Storrar says. “People just saw that their taxes were going up,” she says. “We really promoted the library’s value the second time, and the referendum passed.”

There are other ways for townships to support a library financially. Clifton Township in Lackawanna County, for example, helped its local library by participating in an eight-year capital campaign. The township has paid seven of its eight $3,000-a-year obligations, secretary Donna Stefanski says. After its final payment, the township will continue to support the library in other ways, she says.

Many townships support their local library with an annual donation. During research for this article, the News heard from many townships about their contributions. Amounts ranged from $200 a year to close to $20,000 a year. The per capita rate ranged from a low of 13 cents to a little more than $5.

Worcester Township in Montgomery County, for example, will donate $6,950 to its local library in 2019, manager Tommy Ryan says. That equates to about 60 cents per capita.

“We’ve increased our contribution by 5 percent in each of the last three years,” Ryan says. “We believe it’s important to provide increased support for this valuable community resource given the cuts to state funding in recent years.”

Pine Creek Township in Jefferson County also decided to increase its annual library contribution. “We have donated $750 annually to
the library for the past 17-plus years,” secretary-treasurer Tina Bernarduci says.

After speaking to the county library representative last year, who told the township that the state matches whatever the library receives from local governments, the township increased its donation to $1,000.

In Washington County, Robinson Township supports the public library in a neighboring borough with an annual $10,000 donation, which works out to about $5.18 per capita.

“We believe very strongly in the library’s value,” manager Crystal Brown says. “Our library has a fantastic director, who keeps her programs relevant and supportive of the community.”

More is needed
As helpful and appreciated as these tax levies and annual donations are, the income is simply not sustainable for many public libraries, Alloway says. When the state cut library aid during the Great Recession, Schlow Centre Region Library lost about $200,000 a year. That put more burden on the municipalities that the library serves to provide financial support.

“We were always dependent on heavy state aid,” Alloway says. “When that disappeared, we had to come up with a different formula.”

Fortunately, the six municipalities that make up the Centre Region Council of Governments — State College Borough and College, Ferguson, Halfmoon, Harris, and Patton townships — stepped up to the plate. The library calls itself an agency of the COG, and each of the municipalities contributes an amount based on the percentage of checkouts, or circulation, by its residents.

“The advantage of six municipalities banding together to fund the library makes my life as library director much easier and provides reliable and predictable funding,” Alloway says. “Instead of making numerous budget requests to multiple municipalities, I do it once to the COG.

“We use a three-year average of each municipality’s checkouts to avoid any dramatic swings in a given year,” she adds. “This year, Schlow has a $2.4 million operating budget, with $1.5 million coming from the six municipalities.”

Harris Township, for example, will contribute $111,333 this year, manager Amy Farkas says.

“The library is a jewel in the Centre

“When you ensure that a library has a guaranteed level of income, you get a high-quality result, and the bigger and better the library, the more it gets used.”
A study commissioned by the state Department of Education’s Office of Commonwealth Libraries, in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Library Association, determined the economic benefit of the commonwealth’s public libraries. The study revealed:
- Libraries provide a return on investment of $5.50 in benefits for every $1 of tax support.
- If public libraries did not exist, the economic loss would be $1.34 billion a year.
- Of 9.1 million adults in Pennsylvania, 51.6 percent visited a public library in a year’s time and 13.2 percent connected with one online.
- Public libraries reported 40.8 million in-person visits in the year preceding the study.

Money isn’t everything
Money isn’t the only kind of support townships can offer to local libraries, however. Genesee Township in Potter County owns the building that houses the library and charges no rent or property tax assessment, secretary-treasurer Kristine Smith says.

“We also provide insurance coverage for the building and pick up the garbage at no charge,” she says.

In addition to donating 8 percent of its real estate tax revenue to the library, the township also helps with maintenance and repairs, such as installing a new sump pump when the basement flooded last year and clearing snow. When Smith orders supplies for the township office, she donates any free items she receives to the auctions that the library and fire department hold as fundraisers. The township also allows the library to hold numerous events throughout the year at the township park free of charge.

“I happen to be a member of the library board,” Smith says, “so I communicate with the board of supervisors monthly about upcoming events, meetings, and fundraisers the library is hosting.”

Smith also posts library events on the township’s Facebook page.

Worcester Township in Montgomery County includes articles from the local library in its quarterly newsletter and allows the bookmobile to park in the municipal building’s lot, manager Tommy Ryan says.

In Fayette County, German Town-
ship not only gives an annual $10,000 donation to the library in a neighboring borough but also allows the library to use the township meeting room once a month.

“It holds a story time for preschool children who normally wouldn’t or couldn’t get to the library,” supervisor Steve Clark says.

Robinson Township’s Crystal Brown says the township supports the library in many ways beyond its annual donation.

“Our personnel have done brick-and-mortar-type repairs to the building,” she says, “and we’ve written letters of support for the library’s grant applications. We also share their activities on our Facebook page and in the township newsletter and post their flyers on our bulletin board.”

Cranberry Township in Butler County houses the community library in its municipal complex and works closely with the library board to achieve mutual goals, manager Jerry Andree says.

“The board of supervisors is absolutely committed to the library,” he says, “which is very important to the community’s vitality. The birth rate is declining, and we are all competing for the same residents. We want to create an environment that makes people want to live here.”

It appears to be working. The library is open seven days a week, and the computer lab is often standing room only, Andree says.

“It’s a hopping place,” he says. “People are lined up in the morning waiting to get in. Visitors from out of the area say all the time, ‘I wish my community had a library like this.’”

The township’s newest collaboration with the library is the creation of Cranberry Township in Butler County has a popular and well-used library that offers much more than just books, including programs such as a children’s computer lab. This year, the library, which is housed in the municipal complex, will add a maker-space, an interactive, hands-on area where users of all ages can indulge their creativity and imagination. (Photos courtesy of Cranberry Township.)
a makerspace, which is somewhat like a small workshop outfitted with tools ranging from low to high tech. Makerspaces are cropping up in schools and other places, where they allow people to come together to share creativity, collaboration, and experimentation.

The library’s makerspace is the 2019 Project of the Year for the Cranberry Township Community Chest (CTCC), which supports the municipality’s volunteer and nonprofit organizations with fundraising and marketing. When the Neus went to press, CTCC was working with township and library staff and outside consultants to define what the makerspace will look like and how it will work.

“The intent,” Andree says, “is to foster not only physical but also personal synergy between the users, resulting in something that is greater than the sum of its parts.”

The township will also contribute to additional library upgrades, including sliding doors, energy-efficient lighting, new carpeting, and an RFID system to track the library’s circulating collection.

Building relationships
Township officials who struggle with allocating taxpayer dollars to public libraries should take the time to learn about all that libraries offer to the community.

“Some officials have an outdated view and knowledge of the role that libraries play,” Cathi Alloway of Schlow Centre Region Library says. “Libraries offer free computer labs, which are especially valuable in areas where not everyone has Internet access. Many state and federal services are only available online, making a computer a must.

“Libraries also play a vital role in preschool services,” she adds. “Many have programs designed to get kids ready for kindergarten.”

One of the best things about libraries is that they serve people of all ages, walks of life, and abilities, Christi Buker of the Pennsylvania Library Association says. Senior citizens learn computer skills and enjoy social interaction, immigrants and non-readers benefit from literacy and English as a Second Language classes, job seekers search for

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positions online and get help building their resume, and visitors take advantage of online continuing education courses.

There are also materials for the visually impaired, and some libraries offer home delivery or books-by-mail for physically disabled patrons.

“The mix of generations is key,” Buker says. “Libraries bring the whole community together.”

Buker suggests that township officials get to know their local library and its director. If the library serves more than one municipality, leverage your joint resources to help support it.

Establishing a relationship between township officials and the library is key, Alloway says.

“I personally have a great relationship with the township managers and elected officials [of the Centre Region COG municipalities],” she says. “The COG has a monthly meeting where all six municipalities’ managers and township officials discuss and make decisions on regional activities. I give an oral and written report at that meeting.”

Alloway also attends several COG committee meetings, including finance and human resources, which has allowed her to build personal relationships in a way she was not able to in previous years.

“This is an extremely rare and positive relationship between a library and its municipalities,” she says.

It needn't be rare, however. Township supervisors should require a report from libraries it supports when the municipal budget is being drafted, she says. Officials can volunteer to read books during story times or give presentations about local government. The point is to get to know your local library and get involved. Supporting it becomes much easier and more important then.

“I am so appreciative of the support municipalities give to libraries to ensure a high-quality resource in their community,” Alloway says.

“We know that many township officials volunteer their time and professionalism to make their municipality a great place to live, work, and play,” Buker says. “Libraries want to be their partners in that. They are the pillars that hold up a community. If we work together to have strong libraries, we will have strong communities.”

“The mix of generations is key. Libraries bring the whole community together.”