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Nov. 23, 2021

To the Working Group on the state of Vermont libraries. Please accept the following as written testimony re. collections.

Collections. The Working Group may study the size and diversity of library holdings and assess the strengths and gaps in materials available to Vermonters. The study of collections may include an assessment of how libraries may best share resources across differing libraries and communities, whether libraries offer community-specific resources, and whether libraries maintain special collections or historical artifacts.

Resource sharing in Vermont libraries is haphazard at best, expensive, and inefficient. It's also a highly valued service: I would suggest that in light of continued budget constraints on the one hand and competition from Amazon on the other, the ability to share collections around the state is the single most important task facing Vermont libraries. It needs a complete overhaul.

Central collection:

The state of Vermont chose to eviscerate the Department of Libraries (VTLIB) budget in 2015, and the effects continue to hamper library services today.

Before the cuts, VTLIB maintained a substantial central collection. Even for libraries with large (by Vermont standards) holdings, it provided a backstop, in particular for large print, book club sets, and other specialized collections. The ABLE service is pretty much the last vestige of those statewide services. These services were irreplaceable for smaller libraries, where buying a regular *and* a large print (and perhaps audiobook and at least one downloadable version) of popular titles is often prohibitively expensive. So users in those libraries often simply have to wait until larger libraries make them available as interlibrary loans, typically months after the initial purchase. Obviously, the central library couldn't provide duplicate versions of everything to everyone, but it was better than where we are today, which is next to nothing.

Demand for those services, on the other hand, has continued to grow. The various formats noted above are a driver. A reader who needs large print or an audiobook to keep up with their favorite series is ill-served by a system that can only provide regular print, or that delays borrowing by months. Increasing diversity also creates a need: A recent directors' meeting identified works in languages other than English as another area where

individual library budgets aren't able to provide a good selection to serve populations of new Vermonters and / or migrant farm workers.

It's heartening that VTLIB is discussing these needs. Right now, in the case of foreign-language titles, it often means telling new Vermonters that we can't serve them.

Ultimately, the decision to eliminate the central lending hub role of the state hasn't saved any money, it's just pushed the cost down to the individual library level: A classic example of a false economy.

Another result is that larger libraries, with more robust collections, are essentially subsidizing these services – with the built-in six-month lag on new titles -- for small libraries. This is a natural occurrence, and not Vermont specific. For example, many large academic libraries have begun charging \$20 per title loaned to public libraries to avoid being turned into lending libraries for the general population. In the Vermont case, however, large libraries that loan too many books via interlibrary or consortial loans are punished through surcharges on the courier system.

Shipping:

The interlibrary loan system needs help. When a major draw for the state's single largest consortium is that it doesn't make borrowing between libraries easier, you know there's something wrong. A large part of that is the courier system.

Rutland has been the canary in this particular coal mine, as the largest collection in the Catamount consortium and one of the largest statewide. In the past three years, RFL cardholders have borrowed, on average, 3,850 titles per year from other libraries and we have loaned 5,790. It is fulfilling the role of backstop that the state central library provided. To handle this 60/40 split between supply and demand, Rutland had to get three courier drops per week, and have had as many as nine bins of books arrive in a single day. Rutland Free is happy to share its collection, but under the heading of "no good deed goes unpunished," libraries are charged extra for every bin and every delivery over the "norm." That doesn't count the staff time involved, or the demands on our physical plant. In Rutland's case, shipping / receiving has completely outgrown the space available, and it's one of the pressing reasons why the library is facing a multimillion-dollar renovation. It is unsustainable.

This is not intended as a tale of woe, but a cautionary one. The state Department of Libraries helped launch the Catamount consortium largely as a pilot for a statewide lending model. It has succeeded beyond its capacity. Borrowers love the access to a broader catalog, and so have stressed the system to the breaking point.

A large part of the problem is that interlibrary loaning will always be hub-and-spoke. Larger libraries will always be asked to loan more of our larger collections than we will need to borrow from our smaller peers, ***particularly once the state stopped providing this***

service. The courier model as it stands is designed as one-size-fits-all in direct contradiction to how it works.

Again, it's not saving any money for Vermont taxpayers, it's just putting the bill on local taxes instead of state ones. ***It's time to take stock of the lessons learned in the Catamount experiment, and act on them.***

Statewide catalog:

The state recently rolled out its CLOVER catalog, which is a step forward, but it's only part of a solution.

Almost 100 Vermont libraries use the Bywater / Koha ILS, including something like 11 of the 15 largest libraries in the state: so well more than half of Vermont borrowers are served by libraries using Koha. In Koha, once a librarian finds an item, it's the matter of a couple of clicks to go ahead and order it. If it's not available, it requires starting the search over in the CLOVER system. The decision by the state to choose incompatible software is, honestly, baffling. I am typing on this on a standard QWERTY keyboard. For those of you familiar with the history of technology, you know that keyboard layout was designed not to make typing easier or faster, it was designed to slow typists down to minimize how often the mechanical keys of typewriters would clash. CLOVER is the QWERTY keyboard of statewide catalogs: designed to slow things down.

Proposal:

The state should be encouraging statewide borrowing. We want our user base to grow, and the way to do that isn't to have artificial barriers to smoothly providing materials, whether in-house or from other libraries. Those barriers will push readers, frustrated by delays, to online services. It does create a class divide, where well-off readers can download their pick of the world's libraries to their tablets instantly, and those with fewer resources have to wait weeks or months to get a book.

Public demand is clear: They expect choice. It's why we have two large consortia and why groups of libraries (like Chittenden County) are forming home-card systems. I would refer you to Mary Danko on that. But the state, instead of leading the way, is acting as a drag on progress through the design of systems that do not reward participation.

The state needs to build a network that ensures popular titles are available in a variety of formats and languages, with an online catalog that enables not only patrons searching but ordering their own titles, and a courier system designed with that in mind. The "big" collections need support to backstop that demand. Amazon is not making it harder to find and order books; libraries are.

A central library – like ABLE – is the best solution for a lot of these issues, which are after all exacerbated if not outright caused by the state's decision to decimate that resource. But even central planning could help. One suggestion is a system whereby certain libraries maintain back catalogs of certain authors and not others. For example, if Rutland

has every Janet Evanovich back to *One for the Money*, could Fletcher Free hold all the Sue Grafton, starting with *A is for Alibi*, and so on? Every library is going to buy as many of the hot new bestsellers as they can afford, but maintaining a back catalog is expensive, and space- and time-consuming.

An excellent working example is the Putney School library (link below). Through the generosity of a single donor, Putney has the finest collection of literature by Black authors and works about the Black American experience in the state, with the possible exception of some of the large academic libraries. How can / will / should the state support their loaning those works to other Vermont libraries? Or is Putney expected to carry the load, and for how long?

In short, I feel that any discussion of the state of Vermont libraries that doesn't address both the challenges and opportunities for a functioning, affordable, and effective system of statewide borrowings is selling the future of Vermont libraries short.

Thank you for your time and attention.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Smathers', written over a horizontal line.

Randal Smathers,

Director, Rutland Free Library

* <https://www.vpr.org/vpr-news/2019-11-07/opening-up-all-of-that-experience-putney-school-alum-builds-librarys-collection-of-books-on-race>