

Testimony on Senate Bill 1225  
Senate Education Committee  
September 21, 2011

offered by  
Molly Rodgers  
Administrator  
Wayne Library Authority  
Honesdale, PA

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you for holding this hearing to discuss Senate Bill 1225 and the Library Code. My name is Molly Rodgers and I am the administrator of a county-based system of seven libraries in Wayne County, which borders the Upper Delaware River. We are rural still, with local farms, fields, and woods. But our rural population represents both those who count generations of their family in the same area and those who have moved in from urban areas, especially New York and New Jersey. In 1999 we were seven local libraries, most were not state aided. We did not share or cooperate with each other. In every library, materials and services were woefully lacking. In 2000 we formed a county system and in the eleven years that we have worked together, we have made great progress. A borrower in even the smallest library has access to over 100,000 items in the county through a delivery system that runs three times a week. By contracting for services we all need, we have become more cost-effective. We share problems, solutions, and expertise among staff. But it hasn't been easy; we had a county library tax for one year, then lost it in an anti-tax backlash. We had state funding that was improving, then faced double digit cuts. Managing to meet a rural community's needs for books, computers, and community space without a stable source of income has been challenging, to put it mildly. Everyone, from individuals and organizations to local and state governments, is challenged now.

I am enormously grateful for your efforts to address the Library Code that will take us forward into our future, and I am grateful for the invitation to speak to you today. From my experience, there are two issues we face as a county system. Both issues I was pleased to see included under "other recommendations" in the Joint State Government Commission's report. Neither is yet addressed in Senate Bill 1225, but they should be.

First, the Bill needs to clarify the primary responsibility for funding public libraries in Pennsylvania. If indeed the primary responsibility is at the local level, then the Library Code needs to spell it out much more specifically. Ironically, the current code requires maintenance of local government support from year to year without actually requiring support in the first place. Moreover, in a state with some 3100 local government entities, it is all too easy for each entity to point the other way when asked for support. The current code uses state funding as an incentive for counties to support their libraries; however, since 2003 the incentive hasn't been available because the level of state funding has been insufficient to run the incentive. Our county funding is, today, exactly the same as it was in 1999. Please consider including in the Bill wording that clearly places responsibility for library funding at the county level and establishes a minimum level of county funding in order to receive state funding.

Secondly, Senate Bill 1225 re-establishes the property tax as the sole basis for local tax support. We need language in the Bill that provides a wider range of revenue options. As I mentioned, we lost our library tax in an anti-tax backlash. At the time, voters were angry at the increases they saw every year in property tax bills. There were many in the community who said they would have voted in favor of supporting the library had they had a choice of something other than property tax. No one likes taxes, and the political climate certainly doesn't favor increases in taxes, but if counties had options in how they raised revenue, they could consider what would work effectively for their region, whether sales, income, per capita, or other basis.

I would like to close by acknowledging the sections of Senate Bill 1225 that grant authority to the Advisory Council and the State Librarian to write rules and regulations guiding our public service in the future. Our business is changing rapidly, and providing for flexibility in the Library Code will help us adapt to our communities' changing needs. I appreciate the opportunity you have given the library community to help the committee shape the best bill possible. Thank you.