

**Vermont Library Association
The Case for State Aid to Vermont's Public Libraries
December 2007**

The health of Vermont's local public libraries is at risk.

Public libraries have been forced to reduce hours, close their doors periodically and draw funds from endowment reserves simply in order to keep their operations alive. At the same time, Vermont's diverse network of libraries is challenged to meet expanding roles in their communities and increased demand for services: to purchase books and media for circulation, to be open to the public on a regular basis, to provide safe places for children to go after school, and to keep pace with changes in technology.

Vermont is one of only eight states that do not provide state financial support for public libraries. Nationally, state governments support 10% of public library budgets. Instead, Vermont's local libraries depend upon local property taxes and private fundraising. These sources are under great strain and the result is an uncertain future for libraries.

Increasing financial pressures for Vermont libraries are driven by higher costs to meet dramatically increased demand for services:

- 1) **Open public access to materials and technology.** In the past 10 years Vermont's public libraries have been asked to provide materials and services as never before. Public library circulation increased 14% between 1998 and 2005, while the number of public library visitors increased by 53%. In 2005, there were more than 3.25 million visits to public libraries, with a total circulation of more than 4.3 million books, magazines and audiovisual materials. In 2005, Vermonters used computers in local public libraries 15,500 times every week.

By providing Internet access to the many people in communities who cannot afford it our libraries have taken on new roles as information and career centers. People searching for jobs, applying to college, researching small business ventures, all have flocked to their public libraries. We are now seeing new generations and new populations of users who had never before come to a public library.

Providing this access comes with significant costs. Our libraries need to replace computer hardware that receives hard daily use. They must continually update software and security, train staff members, and, in many cases, hire IT personnel in order to keep up-to-date with the information needs of residents of a rural state.

- 2) **Other non-traditional services.** The costs associated with technology alone justify state support, but there are other challenges for public libraries: providing after school services and a safe environment to children; workforce development services for increasing numbers of Vermonters; and outreach services for both the youngest and the oldest members of our communities (bookmobiles, outreach to day care centers and senior centers).

- 3) Basic, non-discretionary costs of daily operation.** In addition to growing demand for services, our libraries face rising costs: utilities; the purchase of books, periodicals, and audio books; technology acquisition and maintenance; maintenance and repair of buildings; and library wages and benefits.

Public libraries are vital forces within their communities.

With the arrival of the information age, some observers have predicted the end of the public library system. The contrary is in fact the truth. Vermonters are using their local libraries in unprecedented numbers. Between 1998 and 2005 circulation increased 14% and library visits increased 53%. In figures reported for the 2005-2006 school year the combined budgets of all of Vermont's public libraries added up to less than 1.4 % of public schools spending. Although libraries are arguably the best educational bargain in the state for our citizens, the sea change in library use is stressing many public libraries to the breaking point.

Vermont state support for libraries does not compare favorably to national norms.

Nationally, state governments provide approximately 10% of operating income directly to public libraries, with the remainder coming from local property taxes (82%), federal sources (1%), and other (8%).

However, in Vermont, the proportions are quite different. Seventy-five percent of public library operating funds come from local taxes, less than 0.1% from state or federal sources, and 24% from other sources, such as endowments and local fundraising. Libraries are constantly searching for ways to raise money and many Friends organizations have some success, but at a cost. Libraries have been forced to establish "development departments" with extra staff, using much-needed resources that could be spent on direct service to Vermont's citizens.

In order to secure the livability and vitality of our local communities, it is time for the state to invest in Vermont's public libraries.

After five years of study and analysis, the Vermont Library Association estimates that the state of Vermont could significantly improve the health of our diverse network of local institutions by establishing a grant in aid program that would invest in all libraries that meet Public Library Minimum Standards. Grants would equal 10% of a public library's operating budget, with a minimum \$1,500 award. This is consistent with the level of state aid common to the vast majority of states. The estimated cost is \$1.6 million annually.

The VLA understands that the legislature will determine the formula and regulations associated with any direct state aid. However, in our research over the last five years, the VLA analyzed formulas from other states to see how the distribution of funds under each one would work in Vermont's public libraries.

It became apparent that the diversity of Vermont's public libraries posed a special problem. The tiny libraries in Roxbury, Williamstown, and Richford have different needs from the major Vermont libraries such as Fletcher Free in Burlington, the Rutland Free Library, and the Kellogg-Hubbard in Montpelier.

To achieve a formula specific to the needs of our rural state and diverse libraries, the Vermont Library Association proposes a formula that has proven successful in the distribution of grants from the Vermont Public Library Foundation, funded through the










Freeman Foundation. This formula was not only the most equitable, but it also had a track record that public libraries and members of the public, including legislators, understood and had found to be fair.

Based on a percentage of each library's operating budget "the Freeman formula" ensured that libraries with small incomes received a modest grant (with a minimum base grant of \$1,500) and larger libraries, serving more Vermonters, received proportionally larger amounts in support of their more comprehensive services.

The grant formula also encouraged local communities to increase support of their libraries as state grants would be tied to local income.

State investments in our libraries would be used wisely.

Each public library is uniquely responsive to the community it serves, and attempts to tailor its services based upon local needs. We list only some of many examples of how Vermont's public libraries would use State funds to enhance, maintain and strengthen the services they provide to Vermonters.

-  Restore or expand existing hours.
-  Bring library services to senior centers, home daycare centers, community lunches, and adults and children who cannot easily come to the library.
-  Replace computer hardware and software.
-  Hire a children's librarian.
-  Add basic facilities such as telephones and restrooms.
-  Purchase new materials for lending to patrons.
-  Obtain new patron services such as audio book downloads.
-  Retain high-quality staff.
-  Make needed repairs to library buildings.