

IS THERE A LIBRARY CONSOLIDATION IN YOUR FUTURE?

Mergers aren't just for corporations anyone, and librarians must be ready for that inevitable call for consolidation

by Thomas J. Hennen Jr.

As Bob Dylan sang, “The times, they are a-changin’.” Very soon, many librarians and other library staff could be working in entirely new organizational structures. The reason can be found in David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson’s *The Price of Governance: Getting the Results We Need in an Age of Permanent Fiscal Crisis* (Basic Books, 2004).

This book was a sequel to the highly influential *Re-inventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector* by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (Addison-Wesley, 1992), which sparked the Clinton administration initiative under Al Gore’s leadership. *The Price of Governance* argues that, in this “age of permanent fiscal crisis,” local budget planners “begin by determining how much taxation the public will bear. Leaders then prioritize specific outcomes and keep piling public works into the shopping cart until they max out the governing authority’s line of credit.”

A key concept in this book is that leaders need to sever the link between *steering* and *rowing*. The groups that do the *steering*—state and county leaders—should determine and quantify the outcomes they desire. They should then let those in the specific funded agency (i.e., the library) do the *rowing*. Library officials must row to the best of their ability, always aiming for the predetermined outcomes that are set by the elected officials at the helm.

Ordinarily it is elected officials and their varied constituencies—whose collective eyes are fixed on the bottom line—that call for a reorganization of library services to, as they believe, be more cost effective. In response, librarians and patrons tend to seek the best organizational structures for providing high-quality services. There is, of course, a huge

abyss here; cost (tax) efficiency and service effectiveness have always been dueling goals.

I direct a state-funded federation of 16 libraries serving 37 communities in Waukesha County, Wisconsin. We have a service population of 366,000. Because we are considering governance options, including consolidated county library service, I am often asked whether I think consolidation options can work. I reply that, in my professional judgment a consolidated library service can be a very good thing if done well; but if it is done poorly, it is a very bad thing indeed.

If or when library consolidation is proposed in your community, you owe it to yourself as a library professional and to your service population to ensure, to the degree possible, that it is done well. So, let us look at what needs to be done.

No more bucks to pass

Those who are actively considering consolidation of library services are doing so for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the more than 30 years of “devolution” of fiscal responsibility for services and funding has nearly run its course. The feds devolved funding responsibility to the states. The states, in their turn, shouldered some of the responsibility but shifted another share onto the shoulders of local government. Then the recession of 2001 hit, and nearly every state faced massive deficits and implemented still further cuts. Further devolution, passing the budget problems down still more to the local layer of government was all too easy for many state legislatures.

With no end to the devolutionary process in sight, local library and elected officials have begun looking at options for wider-unit organization. There are currently at least six geographic areas in the United States where officials are considering the merger or consolidation of library services (see sidebar). Unfortunately, each effort reinvents the wheel because the library profession has failed to develop the research data needed to guide such efforts. Those who spearhead these proposals are usually casting about for efficiencies because they view the multiplicity of municipal, school, and academic libraries in any given geographic area as duplication of effort.



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Elected officials tend to strive for a reduced impact on taxes and a level of library service that the public does not complain about. Librarians and trustees, for their part, want to secure increased funding and deliver services that the public raves about.

Still, for all the talk in the library profession over the past half-century about wider units of service, there are precious few road maps or guidebooks to use when the time comes for librarians faced with such a proposal to examine their options.

Consider, for example, Toronto, where seven independent libraries have been amalgamated into the Toronto Public Library—a single library service unit that contains 99 branches. One observer, who wished to remain anonymous, confided during the 2003 ALA Annual Conference there that most of the public and the politicians saw the result as a resounding success in providing a seamless service at a better cost. Some staff members were delighted because the resulting “harmonization of wages” triggered substantial raises. But other TPL workers lamented what they perceived as the new distance between professional staff and administration on service development issues.

Responding to increasing calls for consolidation at its January meeting, the Ohio Library Council resolved, “to embark on a research project that will focus on the merits of consolidation, decentralization, collaboration, and independence of library services.”

Many more state and regional library associations will soon consider the issues that the Ohio Library Council is addressing. They will do so because local or state officials demand the discussion. What librarians need is help in framing that discussion.

Does governance change libraries?

Here’s what library practitioners know and don’t know about mergers. We know that:

- Independent municipal libraries serve one-third of the United States population;
- Consolidated county libraries serve another third.
- School and special districts provide service to another 15% of the population.
- Other forms of library governance provide service to the remaining 17% of the population.

What we do not know is what *difference* these forms of governance and funding make in people’s lives. No one has conducted a rigorous assessment of the process of reorganizing library services, the resulting costs, or the quality of the service outcomes. Such an assessment would assist elected officials, librarians, and library users in developing the best and most cost-effective library structures for the 21st century.

In the end, library governance and funding decisions are political ones. However, the best decisions are always based on the type of reliable quantitative and qualitative information that such studies could provide.

There is a thread running through all library service questions and that thread is value. Echoes of the past and fears for the future haunt libraries everywhere. In the not-so-distant past, those who made decisions about the funding and operation of libraries shared a consensus on their purpose: collecting, storing, organizing, and making available printed materials for an intended audience of students, researchers, or the public at large.

The internet has fractured that consensus, leaving

The Effects of Governance Down Under

In January, my wife, Valerie, and I traveled to Australia for a vacation and study tour of libraries. Along the way, we visited the national library in Canberra, three state libraries in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, and six individual libraries, making comparisons to what we knew of United States libraries. As we drove through the magnificent Australian countryside, we noted the way in which the flora and fauna change as the climate, soil, and stewardship changed. It became clear that differences in the laws, customs, and economics between governing authorities have a very large impact on library services as well.

Australia has three levels of government: federal, state, and local. In the United States there are four: federal, state, county, and city. County

libraries, which serve one-third of the United States population, are therefore not possible in Australia, although multijurisdictional cooperatives are encouraged there, as they are here, by Australian state policy.

In Australia, police, fire, and schools are state functions. In the United States, they are local. The cost of library services relative to local budgets would appear much higher in the United States if the cost of police, fire, and schools were not locally supported. However, the differences in fiscal climate and terrain vary even in the United States.

I have frequently heard U.S. librarians cite the property-tax support of libraries as if every state funds its libraries in exactly the same way—a myopic view indeed. Although ad-

valorem property taxes are the most common form of library support, some states instead dedicate sales tax revenue, substantial funding from local income tax, or penal fees to libraries.

In the UNITED STATES, county libraries are more common in states with a county commission form of governance (with three to seven commissioners often elected at large) than in states with a county legislature form of governance (with 20 to 50 supervisors, usually elected in districts).

States whose laws contain a strong home rule or city charter provision are less likely to see wider units of library services. Only 40% of the states even provide for library districts (*AL*, June/July 2002, p. 69–70; *Library Journal*, September 15, 2004, p. 36–38).—T.H.

some to equate libraries with street lamp-lighters. Others, most notably librarians, continue to believe in the relevance of the library professional and the institution of the library as critical 21st-century players. For libraries, this split could be called the “other digital divide,” one that adds urgency to the need to prepare for the calls for mergers and consolidation that will inevitably increase in the years ahead.

It's critical that librarians be active in developing the state library laws that affect service outcomes. For example, librarians need to get more involved in state-level attempts to pass district legislation; this is often a better alternative than other forms of consolidation. The profession must also get the American Library Association to take the lead by examining the value of wider units of service and determining what the likely

local pressures are for such initiatives. Then we must find proactive solutions.

Trying times require bold new solutions: Can anyone deny that these are trying times?

As I found on a recent trip to Australia, officials there make extensive use of the triple bottom-line concept of equity, efficiency, and effectiveness to assess program efficiency. Librarians in the United States should harness that triple bottom line in their own institutions. It is not enough to look at the bottom line of efficiency, or total cost. We must also devise library service structures that are *fair* to all groups of taxpayers and library users, so equity issues must share the bottom line as well. Effectiveness belongs on the bottom line too, because regardless of the price, poor service is *never* a good value. ❖

Library Mergers under Consideration		
Community	Activity	Reference
Ohio Library Council	At its January 2005 meeting, the OLC resolved “to embark on a research project that will focus on the merits of consolidation, decentralization, collaboration, and independence of library services.” The research will include: “Recommendations for successful strategies to initiate the consolidation of services, cooperation, and/or partnership among libraries.” “Models of success that will include a review of consolidations, cooperatives, and/or partnerships that have been successful, and how they achieved that success.”	www.olc.org/news_story111504.asp
Cuyahoga County, Ohio	In answer to Cuyahoga County Treasurer Jim Rokakis calling for consolidation, the county library system secured \$100,000 in grants to begin a feasibility study in spring 2006. The current consolidation does not include the city of Cleveland and seven smaller suburban municipalities.	www.freetimes.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=2192
Kansas City, Missouri	Kansas City Consensus, a nonpartisan independent public interest research firm, conducted a year-long, in-depth study of library needs in the greater Kansas City area. There has been wide interest in the report around Kansas City and among the wider library audience nationally. The author served as a consultant on this project, which was conducted by Jennifer Wilding of KC Consensus.	www.haplr-index.com/MakingBook.htm
Scott County, Iowa	Wilding also leads this \$100,000 study of governance options funded by river boat gambling grants to the four libraries in this 160,000 population county that includes two of the “Quad Cities” on the Iowa/Illinois border.	www.librariestogether.org/
Stutsman County, Idaho	A committee comprised of representatives from the county library and Jamestown’s Alfred Dickey Public Library has recommended merging the two operations. Voters will weigh in on the decision in the June 2006 primary election.	www.co.stutsman.id.us/images/June%2021,%202005%20Comm%20Min.pdf
Milwaukee, Dane, and Waukesha Counties in Wisconsin	Mayors and municipal executives in Milwaukee and Waukesha Counties are calling for study of library governance options. The Dane County Library Service Board agreed. All three counties are planning a joint study based in part on a proposed IMLS grant for \$300,000 and local funds of up to \$100,000.	www.dcls.info/imls.pdf