

Dear Members of the Common Council,

The Madison Public Library Board is writing to advocate for a referendum that would support our beloved library system.

At the July 11, 2024, Madison Public Library Board Meeting, the Library Board passed a preliminary 2025 Operating Budget that would continue the current service levels at Madison Public Library and provide a pathway forward for the Imagination Center at Reindahl Park if certain conditions are met. However, the Board also approved a 5% budget reduction scenario that offers required reductions in priority order:

- \$120,692.63 - elimination of Sunday hours
- \$323,793.35 - elimination of 3-3.5 full-time equivalent programming staff and some program services & supplies, *with directions to prioritize the reductions of services/supplies over staff*
- \$644,205.12 - elimination of the equivalent of our evening hours, *while requesting that some evening hours be preserved over morning hours so we have a mix of daytime/evening hours for the community*

Now that the preliminary 2025 Operating Budget has been approved by the Library Board, it will go to the Mayor's Office to be incorporated into the City of Madison's budget this fall. **As the City of Madison works to draft a 2025 Operating Budget in the face of a \$22 million structural deficit**, the Library Board wants to express strong support for a referendum option that:

- funds the operational cost to continue, enabling the Madison Public Library to maintain its current service hours, staffing levels and programming.
- includes the funding needed to open and operate the Imagination Center at Reindahl Park

The Madison Public Library Board believes in the power of strong libraries to transform communities. As a board, we make budget decisions through an equity and access lens, and we know that libraries serve as critical lifelines for neighborhoods. Because of this belief, we are committed to seeing the Imagination Center move forward, as the Reindahl Park area has long been considered a service desert—not just for libraries, but for many other City services that libraries can help bring to the neighborhood. The Imagination Center at Reindahl Park has been in process since 2014 and funds have already been committed from both the City of Madison and the Madison Public Library Foundation for the construction of the library. While the Board would like to see the Imagination Center at Reindahl Park open and operating, we don't want it to happen at the expense of existing services without a deeper discussion of impacts across the city.

“The harsh restrictions imposed by the state legislature in 2011 have severely limited the City of Madison’s ability to increase revenue through traditional means. This situation leaves us with no viable option other than a referendum to secure the funding needed to maintain library services,” said Lisa Hempstead, Madison Public Library Board President. “Without the funds provided by the referendum, we will inevitably be forced to make difficult decisions that will lead to reductions in programming, staffing, hours of operation, and essential services.”

The Board recognizes that the City of Madison has worked creatively for the last 13 years to help lessen the effects of an increasingly difficult structural problem caused by strict levy limits imposed by the Wisconsin State Legislature in 2011. As a result of these limits, Madison residents and businesses get back only 18 cents for every one dollar of State taxes paid. In addition to the growth of the city, high inflation rates, and lasting impacts to City revenues from the Covid pandemic, alternative options are limited. While a referendum *would* increase property tax rates across the City, under the current proposal for a \$22 million referendum, the average impact to homeowners would be a total increase of \$240/year or \$20/month.

Prior to approving a preliminary 2025 Operating Budget, the Library Board heard from more than 60 citizens who expressed what they value about the services provided by Madison Public Library. Among those services were free and engaging programs, library books and collections, meeting spaces, technology and WIFI, research resources, voting, the Dream Bus, the future development of the Imagination Center at Reindahl Park, and so much more.

“This referendum represents a pivotal opportunity to invest in the heart of our community—a place where knowledge, culture, and community spirit converge,” said Hempstead. “The Madison Public Library is a cornerstone of our community, where worlds connect and dreams are built. Libraries offer invaluable resources and programs that support lifelong learning, cultural enrichment, and social engagement.”

The Madison Public Library Board encourages the City of Madison to add a referendum option to the November 5, 2024, ballot.