

Metropolitan merger of public libraries in Dane County

A summary of activities and findings by the Directors of the Dane County Library Service, the Madison Public Library, the Middleton Public Library, and the Monona Public Library

Following the conclusion of the study of governance options for Dane County Libraries,¹ four library directors met over several months to assess the possibility for a joint library involving the metropolitan area of Madison and surrounding communities, with the possible inclusion of the territory served by the Dane County Library Service.

An initial examination of the issues resulted in the study of several elements of a future merged unit:

- Governance/board structure and representation²
- Policy alignment³
- Cost-sharing and taxing mechanisms⁴
- Facility ownership and maintenance⁵
- Personnel compensation and representation, organizational structure, positions, and staff assignment⁶

These initial discussions concluded with a shared belief that the details of many of these elements could successfully be negotiated among the parties, resulting in a joint library agreement acceptable to all parties.

The second phase of the exploration involved the development of an operational model that would continue the current and expected level of public library services in the communities of Madison, Middleton and Monona. This process aligned staffing, public service hours, and programming. It consolidated many support services in the areas of collection development, technical services and administration, with a goal of streamlining workflow and reducing the fiscal requirements of these essential functions.⁷

The third phase of the exploration expanded the newly-developed operational model⁸ to include the territory currently served by the Dane County Library Service. It took advantage of consolidating similar outreach service models and preserved other outreach services including the bookmobile, daycare service, and service to the jail populations. It increased the resident base of the merged unit by the population of the areas taxed by the county for library service, while maintaining the basic reimbursement structure⁴ currently in place. Since no shift in patterns of use among Dane County libraries is predicted from this shift, no significant overall cost savings are likely.

While the workgroup continues to believe that consolidation offers library users certain advantages, it remains doubtful that consolidation offers taxpayers any short term savings. As long as the existing partners continue to contribute to the rich web of library services currently available in Dane County, it is unlikely that there will be the political will or popular support for changing the current public library service model in Dane County.

This brief summary of our work, accompanied by supporting documents as footnoted, represents our joint conclusions and is shared with our respective library boards as our study concludes. It serves to document our work, primarily for the occasion when this issue, in whole or in part, is revisited.