

THE HIDDEN VALUE OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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Several years ago a visiting Eastern European professor toured our city. Seeing your community with new eyes is not only refreshing but also enlightening. Thus, I was anxious to hear about Green Bay from the point of view of a Slovakian scholar. Certainly he would be impressed by the industry in our town, or our beautiful college and university campuses. As he looked forward to attending a Packer game, the Stadium would probably also be high on the list. And, even though his country was far older than ours, I was sure that our museums would probably impress him. It was a surprise, then, when he excitedly recounted his visit to the Brown County Library, about all the people who were there, handling books, reading books, checking out books and about the great number of books available to anyone who wanted to read them. "The books!" he gasped, "everyone has access to books, they can touch them, AND they can take them home! Do you know how wonderful that is!" And indeed, I did not. Never had I considered the library in terms of privilege – free access to information. No money required. No computer required. No social standing required. Until that moment, it never occurred to me that the protection of public institutions ultimately protects a community's freedom and is democracy in practice.

A renowned international scholar whose country in recent years had shifted from a totalitarian regime, he was now searching the world for music to bring back to his university library something that was sparse there. "I don't understand," I told him, "how could this be so exciting it was just the county library," an institution that we all grew up with; it's always been there. He then went on to tell me that in his country, they were just now starting libraries, that most libraries were either private or for scholars on university campuses and that the books in them were not allowed to be removed so that if you were reading or researching, it could only be done in the library.

Today, information is at our fingertips, quite literally with the advent of the Internet, and is easy to take for granted. But when you go to the core of this argument, there is something far deeper for us to think about, especially as we look at governmental cuts, tax cuts, and re-evaluating what is important to a functional, free and democratic society. Since the library is a constant, it is easy for it and its value in our communities to become invisible. Indeed there is the Internet, however, everyone does not have access to the internet. There is also the issue of the evolution of a paperless society, one that relies substantially, almost exclusively, on computers. However, with so much riding on a single source it is for us an Achilles heel and one simple glitch or attack could make all this information evaporate in a very soundless poof. Where would we be without it? Where would knowledge go?

Public libraries are the foundation of freedom because they give everyone equal access. When our Founding Fathers began this country, they felt that an

educated population was vital to the establishment and preservation of a free society. Beginning with Benjamin Franklin who set up the first lending library in the early years of our country and reaching a hallmark with Andrew Carnegie at the turn of the last century, libraries have been considered fundamental to our society. When Carnegie founded the Carnegie Corporation, his mission was to “promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding.” To do that, he backed libraries with \$56M to fund 2,509 libraries throughout the English speaking world, sixty of them in Wisconsin including in Green Bay in 1901 (now Jefferson Court) because he believed that it “empower[ed] working people to improve their lot”, a very Republican idea, if you will. This is not a lost mission in today’s Internet society as the Corporation continues to substantially support libraries. Why? Because, in addition to the free dissemination of information, libraries are one of the only places complete original texts can be found in tact. They are not expurgated by unknown authors which can change author intent, nor are they over-written by opinionated authors. They are intact as the author intended.

Especially with the advent of the internet, we take libraries for granted and even question their importance. As small business owners we are sensitive to two government issues, increased taxes and government interference. Yet, when we take a good look at what our tax dollars are doing, it is important that we keep an eagle eye on what we could be sacrificing, one small nick at a time: Our freedom.

Even if we ourselves do not use the library regularly, if we wouldn’t be caught without our Kindle, if we never read at all, the presence of and access to the library is an intrinsic part of democracy. When we cut hours, cut budgets, cut access to materials, we shrink that freedom one book at a time. It is in the best interest of our society as a whole that public libraries offer access to the community at large lest what we have fought for be lost in one quiet little gasp. Something to think about.