

## John Chrastka

Across the country, around 90% of tax revenue for local public library operations are appropriated and collected at the local level, sometimes within one zip code and always within a legally limited service area. Even with the budget outliers, the majority of funding and policy decisions for libraries are made and expressed by a locally appointed or elected governing or advisory board, or is in the hands of a municipal or county/parish authority. Yet, most of the recent scholarship about libraries and public or tax policy focuses on national or federal issues. In the lived experience of boards and librarians, decisions that are made at the local level about levies and millages and warrant articles and parcel taxes are far removed from any national discussion about access or connectivity or appropriations for capacity building. When a toe is dipped into a particular state, it is often by way of illustration rather than critique. I am not sure if this is a purposeful exclusion of the local level, or if it is a certain kind of aphasia about where the money and power really comes from.

Through EveryLibrary's work, I have been exposed to the limitations and potential leverage that tax and public policy discussions can have on an extremely local level. I have personally seen the negative impacts an under-informed library director or board of trustees has when their community needs to consider the tax code or funding structure. I have wondered before if this low-level of awareness stems from our collective lack of engagement in public debates about taxes and authority, or if it flows from a lack of training in the political literacy skills needed to manage in the landscape of other publicly funded institutions. As an industry, are we hesitant to look at and talk about taxes for fear that if we acknowledge where our revenue comes from we may not be truly deserving of it?

With the launch of *The Political Librarian*, EveryLibrary hopes to start moving past that question and into a new discussion. We aim to promote research and conversation that helps our industry to engage and reenvision tax policy and public policy on the extremely local level. Personally, I have several big questions about libraries that I'd like to explore over the next few editions. I'm interested in uncovering issues of race and class that permeate and often derail conversations that ask us to reconsider the way Americans tax their property, sales and income, and how that affects libraries. I'd like to start a discussion about the way that Interlibrary Loan hangs on a series of ad hoc

regional MOUs, and how it could be better funded and more effective with new models. I'm interested in seeing how lessons from business incubators and startup investors could be applied by Friends and Foundations and influence the local tax base for libraries. And I would like to explore the feasibility of using social impact bonds to fund library facilities and programs, tying our outcomes to the policy priorities of institutional and private sector investors by issuing public debt.

But, I don't have enough wisdom or experience to ask enough of the questions that need to be asked about taxes and policy. I do know and understand that the public library today rests on the triumph of the early 20th Century Progressive movement. The notion that the government has a role in people's lives, and in support of their livelihoods, remains as radical in some circles today as it was then. Key civic, social, and educational institutions like public schools, health departments, public safety, parks, public transportation, and libraries sprung from a vision that cooperatively funding services through progressive tax policy is good. It's just. It changes society for the better. We are the heirs to that policy and tax stewardship. One of the most significant reasons libraries lose elections and watch their budgets erode is because of a local expression of an anti-tax philosophy which runs a counter-narrative to how we take care of our neighbors, selves, and communities. If we are trying to win elections and succeed in budget negotiations for our institutions, it is incumbent upon us to talk as strongly about our philosophy of government as those whose opinions, on Election Day, can countervail.

*The Political Librarian* will provide a venue for listening and learning across a wide range of experiences, and a platform for sharing insights from the forefront of services by the librarians who need funding, authority, and policy to align with, and support, the actual practices of modern librarianship. I am grateful to our Editor Lindsay Sarin, and our associate editors Rachel Korman, Johnna Percell, and Francine Fialkoff for their dedicated volunteer work in making this first issue happen.

Around our nation, there is a consistent unevenness to the way that public monies are used for the common good. The way that state and national policies are expressed locally is a fascinating story to watch unfold. The

local issues that drive each library election or budget negotiation we work on are sometimes tragicomic. It is because of this experience that we believe a new discussion should be rooted in the unique challenges faced by towns, cities, townships and counties, and expressed by departmental or district libraries. With *The Political Librarian*, we are inviting a new conversation and are committed to listening to the voices who bring their own perspec-

tives to the conversation. This journal is intended to be an enterprise-level platform for asking you to ask your questions. Please join us as we explore, question, listen, and then lobby to enact some solutions.

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