

Why I resigned from the Library Board, Part I

By Adelaide Myers, former chair of the Carbon County Library System Board of Directors

WyoGives Day was July 15. It is an annual fundraiser to benefit Wyoming nonprofits and to give donors an easy way to choose causes that match their values. Some participant organizations list donation matches or challenges which continue until they reach a certain goal. Only non-profits are allowed, so the Carbon County Library System could not participate directly, but through a 501(c)(3) sponsor, such as the Carbon County Library Foundation. I asked the Foundation to do so after I was approached by an anonymous donor who wanted to make a \$15,000 WyoGives Day match for the System.

The Foundation agreed at first and applied to WyoGives to be part of the event. Unfortunately, the Foundation did not agree to list the \$15,000 match unless it could retain control over how the funds could be used by the System due to fear that the funds might be used to cover operating costs. So, I suggested we could use the money instead to fund a public awareness campaign about two critical ballot issues in the coming election, and how those issues would impact the System. This the Foundation regarded as “lobbying” and again declined. It was too late to sign up with a different non-profit sponsor, so per the donor’s wish, the money went to a different charity without a match. The donor was disappointed at the lost opportunity to raise \$30,000 for the System, as was I.

All county library foundations in the state are creatures of Wyoming statute, and they have restrictions on how they can use the *principal* of their endowments established by the 2008 Wyoming Library Endowment Challenge. The principal cannot be used for operating costs. This narrow restriction is reflected in the Foundation’s bylaws. But the bylaws do *not* restrict how the Foundation can use interest raised by the principal, funds raised before the Endowment Challenge, or funds raised through the Foundation’s ordinary annual fundraising events, like the Color Run and the Christmas silent auction.

The Foundation is also not restricted from receiving funds designated for the System and passing them on to the System unrestricted, or pursuant to the donor’s wishes. But the Foundation board (which has no term limits) decided it cannot do this. The Foundation board refuses to act as a “pass through” for donations, even though it has already done so. It used its Givebutter online platform just this Spring to facilitate a major fundraiser for the LSRV Friends of the Library group. Those funds may be used however the LSRV group chooses, including paying for the wages of the LSRV branch staff, should that be necessary.

The Foundation has long held the *belief* that it can give money to the System for anything but operating costs. Operating costs are a lot of things, but the largest cost is staffing. The fear has always been that if the Foundation covers staffing once, the County will expect it to continue doing so forever. I get that fear. That’s why I’ve repeatedly pressed the County Commissioners not to take the fundraising we’ve done as sustainable.

The larger, underlying *principle* (that the Commissioners say they agree with) is that public services like libraries should be funded by public dollars (taxes); they should not have to rely on private donations. I agree with this principle, but the key word is “should.” In this time of chaos created by Freedom Caucus legislators who won’t stop at reducing property taxes—they want to abolish them—“should” has given way to “must.” And there is no dispute that the County must fund critical services such as law enforcement, road and infrastructure maintenance, emergency response services, etc. before they fund libraries, museums, and senior centers, etc.

I still respect that principle, but the System board under my leadership adhered to a higher *priority*: keeping the libraries open for the people that need them the most. Like kids. Kids did not ask for property tax cuts. Low-income parents did not ask for them. Their landlords aren’t passing property tax savings on to them as reduced rent. These people don’t care who is to blame for libraries closing; they’re too busy struggling to stay alive and give their kids a fighting chance at economic success that seems more elusive every day. If we close branch libraries in struggling towns, chances diminish for everyone that lives there.

And what’s worse, if a library closes and ceases to be part of the system, it is extremely unlikely it will reopen as part of the system again. A standalone library—even if it can be considered a true library rather than just a free book exchange—is far inferior to one that is part of a system, particularly one that is linked to a foundation. Closures and a very public bankruptcy of the System’s bank account was the goal of our former library director who rage quit when the System board voted to look for funds elsewhere rather than close Hanna and Medicine Bow. The next thing she did was join the Foundation board ... did I mention the Foundation board has no term limits?

Meanwhile, we on the System board searched for solutions that would serve all Carbon County residents no matter where they live, even if we lacked the money to staff their branches at times. Three of the Foundation board members have been very helpful, bringing creative ideas, energy, and determination not to give up. One of those wonderful people even stepped up as our interim director—twice! She cautioned me against writing this letter. I recognize that the Foundation did not have enough time to make a decision. But I believe the WyoGives Day debacle is a symptom of how the Foundation’s line-in-the-sand about public vs. private funding for operating costs has become a psychological impediment rather than an actual one. The Foundation is in no way prohibited from passing funds through to the System unrestricted. If the state can get through its self-imposed funding crisis, and I believe it will, the System still needs money now to keep those branches from closing before we get over this fiscal hill.

If you read the Foundation’s bio on the WyoGives website, you can see why their “we won’t fund it if they won’t” attitude is counterproductive. It’s like refusing to feed your kids because the city turned your water off, then asking for money for groceries. It’s too negative. All about what the Foundation *won’t* support. Kind of a backwards way to go about asking for money, if you ask me. Unsurprisingly they raised only \$530 through WyoGives Day.

Don't get me wrong, I love our library System, and I think everyone is truly grateful for the over \$500,000 the Foundation has given to the System over the past decade. I did not want to leave the Board, but I felt the only way to say what I have to say and not risk retribution to the System was to step down before writing this letter. If this letter causes you heartburn, blame me, not the System.

I as an individual call on the Carbon County Library Foundation board to re-think its direction (and consider adding term limits for its members). I call on the Foundation to consider what it would do with all of the money it saved if the County could only afford to keep the main library open, if anything. And I call on the Foundation to take the helm on educating the public on the ballot measures, as the way they generously did with the System's Centennial celebrations last winter. The System could not have managed that on the heels of a 53% budget cut.

I don't know who needs to hear this, but I disagree with closing libraries to make a statement. I think there are better ways to get attention and influence the hearts and minds of voters. I think our kids deserve genuine effort, not infighting. If that makes me a traitor to my former profession as a librarian, so be it. I'd rather save libraries than be orthodox.

And what is so wrong with private donations for public services? I get that it shouldn't be the norm, and if Wyoming voters do decide to defund their local governments and schools, then our System will have to shrink to one location—or none. Free public libraries exist in America primarily because of one wealthy Mr. Andrew Carnegie. Governments built their library systems up following his example, not vice versa. We must shed this sense of entitlement to government funds in times of great financial distress. Let the people who want to donate to save their libraries save their libraries with their donations. That's what I was thinking when I wrote my checks.