February 26, 2015

Dear Somerset County Library Commission Member:

I write to you as the President of the Friends of the Warren Township Library and a resident of Somerset County. As the commission whose responsibility it is to oversee the Somerset County Library System, you should be aware of the recent changes and effects of these changes on local library patrons and taxpayers.

 As a stakeholder in the library system, I am deeply concerned about the numerous decisions that have been made by the administrators of the library system under the guise of improvement. I, along with many other patrons and citizens of the county, feel that these decisions are benefitting the minority, mainly those in charge of central office, rather than the communities and patrons the libraries serve.

Most recently, each library was instructed to remove all local Facebook pages. Warren’s Facebook page was exemplary, created and maintained entirely by a volunteer, and followed by the many members of the Warren community who are an integral part of the success of our library. We were told we had to remove our FB page because other library pages were not as well done; ergo all of them would be replaced with a centralized page.

Next, the Friends of the Library was informed that we would have to turn over book sale funds to the county system if we wanted to continue to collect book sale money through the circulation desk. After consulting with attorneys, we were informed that this request: co-mingling of funds, is illegal and should not be allowed. We have shared this legal insight with the administration several times with the repeated promise of a response, yet none has been forthcoming.

Recently, it was announced that there would be a 66% budget cut for all programs in all of the libraries. Our library has a stellar reputation related to the eclectic and frequent programs we offer. Our program director (Marcela Dunham) does an exceptional job finding speakers and activities that stimulate and inform our community. When questioned about the severity of this cut, the administrators at central office suggested we find free speakers to fill the program schedule. Our program attendance would certainly decline if we could not provide those programs that fit the needs of our community. In relation to programs, as of March 1, the local libraries are no longer allowed to advertise the schedule of programs in their local newspapers, a calendar that has been published weekly for decades. Once again, central office will be in charge.

Last week, our director was informed that she is not qualified to continue in her capacity as Director of Warren Township Library. In November, she and other Directors in the eleven libraries were informed that they would have to reapply for their present positions. Even now the final outcome of moving all directors and reconfiguring staff for the “best” possible positions, will not be made known to these hard working individuals until May.

These examples are a mere representation of the numerous changes that have been implemented to slowly erode the local library staff’s responsibilities and decision making. I would be glad to share the list of other administration decisions which make this evident.

While all of this may appear as a means of reducing cost and providing efficiency, be assured there will be no reduction in our annual tax bills for library service. Instead, central office continues to grow. It is obvious that it is the intention of this administration to create “cookie-cutter” libraries throughout the system with no regard to the distinct character, history, or demographics of each community. Every taxpayer in town is a stakeholder in his/her local library with the expectation that the library will serve their needs and reflect the interests of their demographics.

Like the neighborhood school, our library is an integral part of the local community. Its purpose is to serve the people of our community addressing their needs and priorities. In our state where home rule has been an established practice, this “corporate” model approach to reconfiguring the library seems to contradict what our citizens want and expect. In the business of providing service, isn’t it essential to know your customer? Not easily done in this new “one size fits all” model.

As a member of the commission in charge of overseeing the effectiveness of the county library system, we would like to know your role in making such changes and ask that you address our concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Carol P. Senff President of the Friends of the Warren Twp. Library