



NORTH COUNTRY LIBRARY SYSTEM

22072 County Route 190 - Watertown, NY 13601

Phone: (315) 782.5540 Fax: (315) 782-6883

www.nclsweb.org

Director: Stephen B. Bolton

NY STATE NEEDS TO PRACTICE EQUITY WHEN MAKING CUTS

Watertown Daily Times Editorial page February 5, 2010

Stephen B. Bolton

“The State is broke.” Understood. “All programs and services should expect to be cut.” Got it. Many State agencies are now facing severe cuts, but libraries have been adjusting to reductions and flat budgets for the past twelve years. It is time for the Governor and State Legislators to put some parity in the budget process.

The North Country Library System (NCLS) budget has been cut **four** times in the past twenty-one months, a cumulative 14-percent reduction. This reduces our funding to the same dollar amount received in 1998. The Governors proposed budget would take another four percent. We realize the necessity of tightening our belts, but not to the extent that it cuts off all circulation! In 1998, NCLS had 33 employees; today there are 21.

NCLS is a State-funded cooperative of 65 public libraries in Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence and Oswego Counties. We provide technology, consultant, and grant assistance, along with a delivery service that allows materials to be shared quickly and efficiently, and we provide over sixty classes annually for staff and Trustees. The idea of having libraries band together to share resources had its start right here in Watertown. In 1948, John B. Johnson Sr. and a group of interested citizens convinced State legislators that libraries could be more efficient, provide better service, and save local taxpayers money, if they were able to work together. Today, the libraries elect a regional Board, and the Board sets the budget and polices. This model of helping a municipal service become more efficient while maintaining local control has worked, and is now used throughout the State. It made sense then, it makes sense now. In fact, the State now budgets \$30 million dollars for Local Government Efficiency grants to help municipalities make plans for sharing services. By funding the Local Government Efficiency Grants, the State government recognizes the value of combining functions and sharing resources. It does not make sense to hand disproportionate cuts to a service that has been doing that for sixty-one years.

Support for libraries in the NY State budget was \$102 million in 2007. It is now \$87 million, and the Governors proposed budget reduces this to \$84.5 million. This money benefits public, school, college and corporate libraries throughout New York State. The allocation for libraries is part of the overall \$133 billion State budget. In the past six years, the State budget has increased by 46 percent, aid to municipalities by 62 percent, and school aid by 47 percent, yet libraries have been set back to a level received twelve years ago. Cuts must be made, but there should be some equity in the process.

We need you to speak up. Library use spikes upward when the economy is down. This is demonstrated by the 150 percent increase in borrowing between the libraries, and the 42 percent rise in the number of visits to libraries in our four-county area over the past six years. Libraries are one of the few public services that can benefit everyone, regardless of income or age, as made evident by the more than 150,000 library cardholders in our four county area.

The 1948 experiment that has been so successful - that of having municipalities share library resources - should not be allowed to die, or to wither away to the point of becoming ineffective. Libraries help people who are willing to help themselves. They need to be treated fairly.