

Forming a Public Library District

Initial question from trustee: My question to you is, would it make sense for us to get together and form a library district? Is this possibly a way to get past this recurring problem and move forward? If so, what steps do we need to take to form a library district? We have two years to work on this and should start now, if this is the path we decide to take. I think we should carefully consider ALL options.

Response from Tracy Cook – September 14, 2011

Your question about districts is a good one, and it probably is something that you should look at. It would provide you with stable funding. You would not have to go to the county and/or city to ask for more funds. Districts are funded by a dedicated library mill levy. They are a lot of work to set up, but the libraries who have gone that route have been very happy that they went for it.

The biggest concern I have about the districting option is whether or not you have you have the required \$5 million in taxable property value for your district. You must have this in order to become a district. Here is a link to the code about forming library districts - http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca_toc/22_1_7.htm If you do meet this criteria then your next steps would be to look at the library district handbook, talk to other library districts (Lauren or myself can connect you with one of the directors), and then explore interest in your community. I created a time line/to do list for another library that I will share with you here. Lauren can also come and do a district training if you would like one. That might help you decide.

Here is a link to the Public Library District Handbook -

http://msl.mt.gov/For_Librarians/For_Public_Librarians/Library_Law/District_Handbook/default.asp

Here is the time line/to do list that I mentioned earlier. Please let me know if you have any questions. I cc'd Lauren on this email, so she has the information as well. I think it's wise to explore all of your options. -Take care, Tracy

Pros of being a district

*Stable funding - you don't have to fight with the county or city over budgets. You might see a decrease but that's generally due to delinquent property taxes, and I don't think any of the districts have experienced this yet.

*You are in charge of everything, so you don't have to go to the county or city when you have an issue with the building or something else in the library. Also I'm finding that district boards and directors are much more engaged and have a lot more fun in their jobs because of the independence of a district.

*If you plan it correctly when you go for the election you generally should end up with extra money which means you can offer new or expanded services.

Cons of being a district

*The start up efforts are a big con. It really varies in terms of the amount of time and energy it takes for a library to create a district. For Stevensville and Clancy it was a fast process, but it took 10 years in Polson. Even in Clancy and Stevensville there were education campaigns, etc. that had to happen and that takes a lot of legwork. In addition to the start up efforts for the vote it takes a lot of work to get the district up and running. A plus side of that is you get to determine how your district is going to function.

*You are in charge of everything, and I mean everything. You will have to figure out how you will handle the accounting, the payroll, employee benefits, running of the library, maintenance, and everything in

between. The three new districts don't seem to mind, but I know every director has had moments of panic as they've thought "did I forget something?"

In all of the districts they have found the election process for trustees to be pretty minimal. Generally trustees don't have to campaign and mail in votes are acceptable, but it's not that hard to work with the school to have May elections. You probably will have to pay for the election costs if you do a mail in vote.

Time line - This one is really hard to do, because both Stevensville and Clancy were able to get a new district in less than a year. I'm creating more of a to do list than a time line, but hopefully this will help.

Months 1 - 2

- Decide if you are going for a district and when you would like the vote to be on the ballot. I recommend trying to schedule this with a regular or school election, because if you go with a mail in vote the county has the right to ask you to pay for part or all of the costs of a mail in (depending on whether or not you are the only thing on the ballot). If you go with the regular or primary elections then you shouldn't have any costs.
- Decide on what services you would like to offer and identify a tentative budget for the district. Talk to the county clerk and find out how much a mill is worth. You will need to know how many mills to ask for on the ballot. I recommend doing what Polson did and asking for more than you will use, so that you can grow in the future and not have to go out constantly to ask for more mills.
- Decide on your district boundaries - can be just within the county and that does make it very clean and easy to map and canvass.
- Talk to the county commissioners. You will need their help during this process. Ask them if they would be willing to put a resolution on the ballot asking people to vote on the levy or if they want you to do petitions. Note: it's easier for you if they say they will pass a resolution without a petition.
- Create a committee to spearhead the district efforts

Months 3-8

- Committee should try and round up money for the district efforts and will have to keep track of donations and expenditures per campaign law. It's pretty straightforward, I believe. A little extra money would help with campaign efforts, but you can probably go low to zero budget as well.
- Create public relations material and begin educating the public at meetings, etc.
- If you have to go through the petition process create the petition, have a lawyer look at it and make sure it's okay. Train volunteers to get signatures and start asking for signatures. MCA 22-1-702 will be helpful (<http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca/22/1/22-1-702.htm>)
- Present petition to county
- Commissioners need to pass a resolution to put the issue on the ballot

Months 9-10

- Continue educating the public and answer questions
- Encourage people to vote on the election day

Then see how it goes - if the vote fails then you have to decide on whether or not you want to try again. If yes you begin the process of setting up the district.