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What Is a Service Area?

Quoting Thomas Jefferson again, for why literacy matters: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy.”

After I mentioned in passing in a much earlier article of this series (Penn-Franklin News 2/17/21; archive #28 at <https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>) that Murrysville Community Library’s (MCL) service area includes Export and Washington Township, I had a fair question directed to me from a reader. Why are they too being served by the local Murrysville Community Library?

Public Libraries in Pennsylvania function under various governing and funding bodies, including, very importantly, statewide governance and funding under the Department of Education, Office of Commonwealth Libraries (OCL). They function within the OCL under a complex set of laws, codes, and incentives meant to encourage, among other things, sharing and serving the whole of the Commonwealth, including serving those communities lacking their own public Libraries.

The bottom line is that MCL’s service area is upped to about 28,000 persons from the base of about 20,000. Export and Washington Township residents, lacking their own public Libraries, are patrons too, and the Commonwealth compensates the MCL accordingly in its state aid formula.

To illustrate further, Salem Township, lacking its own public Library, and by agreement, is within the service area of Greensburg Hempfield Area Library, as are some other localities.

The state’s Library Code designates a direct service area as: “The municipality to which the governing body of a library is responsible for extending all its services without charge.” That is the Municipality of Murrysville in the case of the MCL. The broader responsibility helps assure that, even in PA communities without their own public Libraries, citizens may have issued to them and use a “free” WLN Library card.

Again, this is a responsibility that comes in exchange for additional state funding.

How fixed in stone is that service relationship? Well it can be altered at the local level by agreement. Just within the past year for example, a realignment has been agreed upon within the WLN. Smithton Borough and South Huntington Township are reassigned to Rostraver Public Library’s service area, from that of Monessen Public Library, and the existing Smithton Public Library is now a branch of the Rostraver Public Library. Monessen Public Library’s Board of Trustees agreed to cede the service area as previously defined, without any disagreement on the matter, so involvement of the Office of Commonwealth Libraries was not required.

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The general unawareness about service areas, responsibilities, and opportunities has been a matter of discussion for the Murrysville Community Library Board for some time. Attempts to address it have been in Strategic Plans more than once over at least ten years, but it has proven difficult to gain traction for better integration. Perhaps by having had the issue raised publicly here, MCL and other WLN Libraries can better address how to serve the outlying constituencies. They are owed service equally in a functioning democracy.

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