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Report: State Budget and Public Libraries

The Pennsylvania state budget is in the news again for the Legislature's failure to approve it in a timely way, meaning by the July 1 start to the 2023-24 fiscal year. The governor's proposed \$44.4 billion total budget (www.budget.pa.gov), as is usual, includes state aid to public Libraries that meet PA Public Library Code standards.

For 2022-23 the state approved a total Library budget that included \$2,238,000 for the State Library in Harrisburg, \$2,567,000 for services for the visually impaired and disabled, \$3,071,000 for Library access, and \$70,470,000 for the public Library subsidy. It is this largest and last portion that goes towards normal operating budgets for all 29 District Centers in the state and their member Libraries, including those of the Westmoreland Library Network (WLN). About 86% of the WLN's state funding gets distributed by formula to individual 23 member public Libraries; the rest, of a 2022-23 total of \$1,431,502, goes towards the operating budget of the WLN headquarters itself and its various shared services.

To put the state's public Library subsidy for 2022-23 in perspective, it is actually below that of the subsidy of 15 years ago, even after a generous, but very exceptional, year-over-year increase for 2022-23 of more than 18%. No change in the subsidy is proposed for 2023-24, essentially the case 2011-22.

As a result of this pattern of funding, a lot of adjustments, including technological modernizations and curtailment of services, have been required over the years for Libraries to remain solvent. Needless to say, this has been a significant issue for PA's public Libraries, but more about that at another time.

For now, I want to simply point out that the state's subsidy is a significant percentage of income for all public Libraries, but the percentage varies a lot from Library to Library depending on other sources of income. Just to take the case of Murrysville Community Library for purposes of discussion, the state subsidy is the second largest source of operating budget income. For the current year it amounts to 21% of income. The largest source of operating income is that from the Municipality of Murrysville, or a little over 69% of income. This is indeed a generous community, and not all are so forward-thinking.

The delay in approving the state budget constitutes an immediate problem for school districts. Public Libraries, like public schools, are governed under the PA Department of Education, in the case of Libraries by the Office of Commonwealth Libraries. But the Library subsidy is distributed in only one lumpsum payment in January/February of each year. For the 2023 Library budget year, the distributions from the state's 2022-23 budget are already in hand, and those from the yet-to-be approved 2023-24 state budget will not be distributed until January/February of next year.

So, no problem about cash flow you might say. Yet, I can recall a year when the state's budget impasse ran into the first quarter of the following year. That is a significant

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problem, but let us hope this time that we will not get to such a point. For now, Library operations remain unaffected by the state impasse. They are invisible to you, the Library patron, and hopefully will stay that way.

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